COMBAT

Eastern Front 1941–44

Soviet Partisan
VERSUS
German Security Soldier

Alexander Hill

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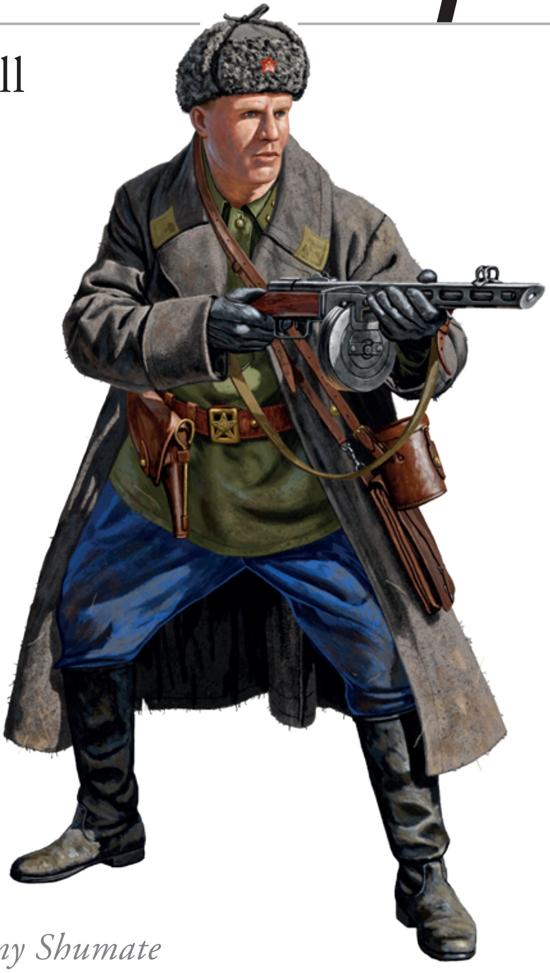

Illustrated by Johnny Shumate

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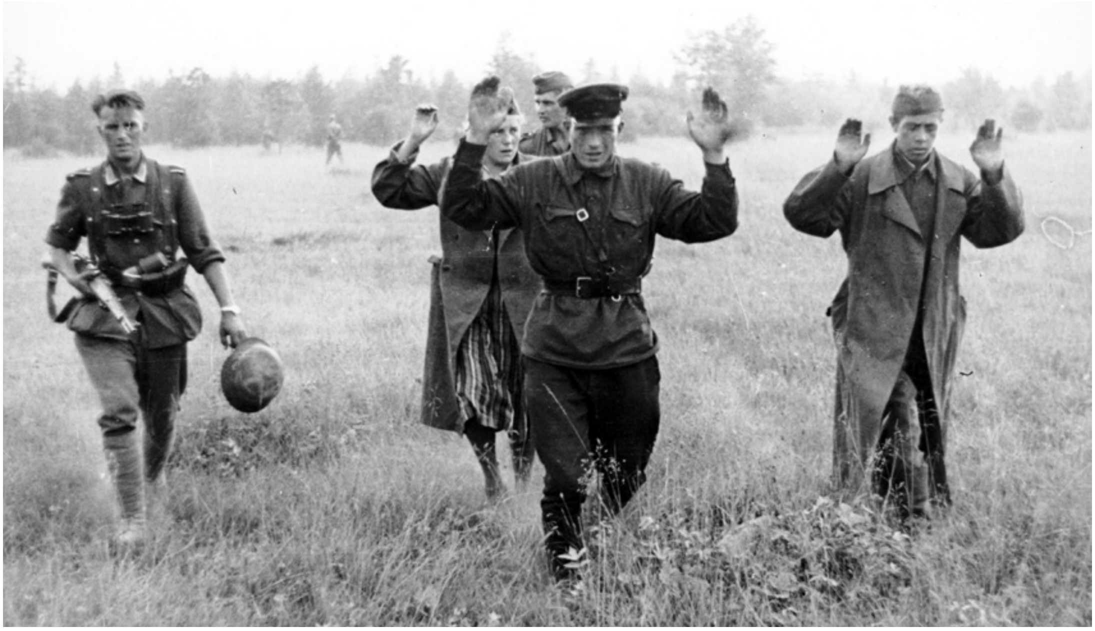
Introduction

By the time German forces crossed the Soviet border on 22 June 1941 and Operation *Barbarossa* was under way, Adolf Hitler and many German military leaders had long since convinced themselves that once the Wehrmacht was unleashed, the Red Army would be destroyed in a matter of weeks. On the Soviet side there was similar hubris. During the spring of 1941, Stalin and some of his close associates also seem to have been able to delude themselves regarding the threat posed by the enemy, convincing themselves that the Red Army would be able to fight what was seen as an inevitable war with Nazi Germany as and when the Red Army was ready, and on foreign soil. If Hitler was going to launch an invasion of the Soviet Union, it was assumed that he would helpfully start with some sort of ultimatum – one that would give the Red Army time to prepare for any German attack. In both cases those involved were of course to be proven so very wrong in their assumptions, and Nazi Germany, its allies, and the Soviet Union would find themselves locked in an epic military struggle that would last nearly four years.

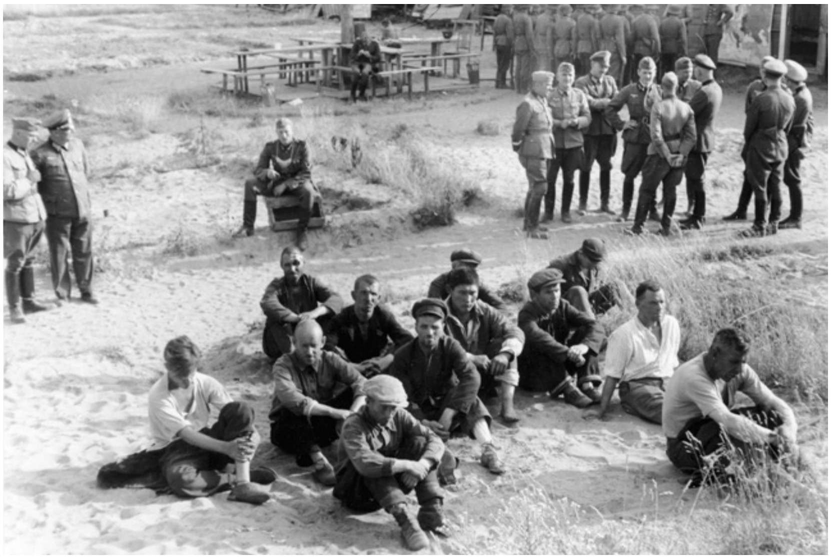
More than three years of this titanic struggle – the Soviet Great Patriotic War (1941–45) – saw fighting in territory that had been Soviet even before the incorporation of Eastern Poland and the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) into the Soviet Union in 1939–40. Despite Soviet preparations during the inter-war period to fight a partisan war in Soviet territory against any future foreign invaders, by the late 1930s the strength of the Red Army was such that Stalin and the Soviet leadership felt confident enough not only to cancel preparations for partisan war, but to remove and eliminate many of those who had been involved in these preparations during the Great Purge of 1936–38. Having done so, during the first days and weeks of the war with Germany and its allies they then ordered the creation of a partisan movement in the German rear.

Despite the efforts of the Communist Party, Red Army and NKVD (Narodnii komissariat vnutrennikh del, or People's Commissariat for Internal



A soldier of Heeresgruppe Nord (Army Group North) escorts Soviet PoWs somewhere in Estonia south-west of Lake Peipus, August 1941. It is unclear whether the soldier concerned is from one of the German security divisions, given that their uniforms were identical to those for soldiers of a standard infantry division. Nevertheless, the rounding up of Soviet PoWs was a common activity for security troops during the German advance. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-010-0919-39 Foto: Schmidt, Georg)

Affairs) to foster partisan war in German-occupied territory – at times in competition with each other – the partisan threat to German forces remained limited for much of 1941. At this time the biggest threat to German forces in their rear areas was often from Red Army personnel trapped behind German lines as a result of the speed of the German advance, and who had to be 'mopped up' by German forces. Many Red Army troops who were cut off from Soviet lines would later find their way into organized partisan detachments, although this was not the norm during the summer of 1941. During this period, if Red Army troops could not fight their way back to Soviet lines, sooner or later they were usually rounded up by German security forces. Escape after capture was not unheard of, and if having escaped from



Somewhere within the area controlled by Heeresgruppe Nord, a group of 'partisans' await execution by firing squad, September 1941. Notice the member of the *Feldgendarmerie* guarding them to the centre-left of the picture, his gorget clearly marking him out. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-212-0221-03 Foto: Thiede)

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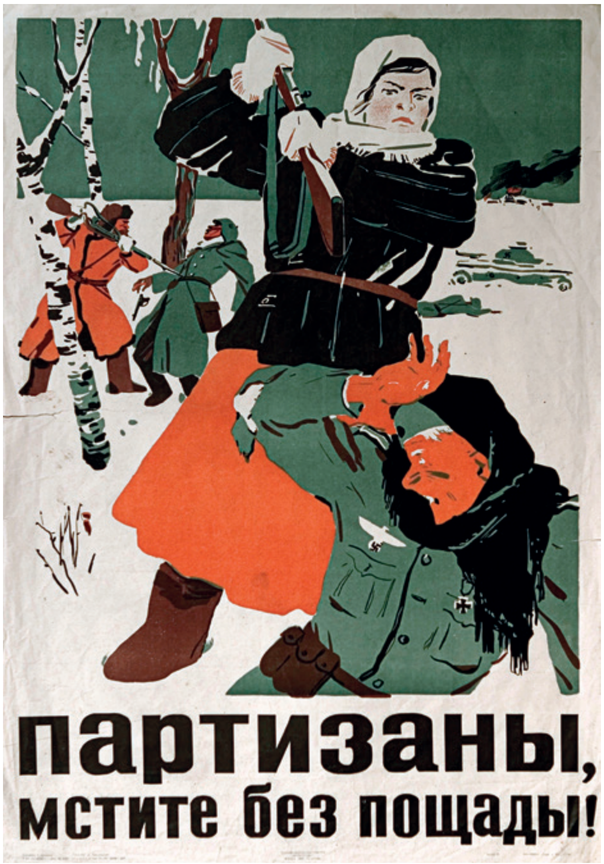
Members of Einsatzgruppe A, an infamous unit that operated in the territory of Heeresgruppe Nord. Although, particularly early in the war, the *Einsatzgruppen* played a role in the anti-partisan campaign as part of their broad 'security' mandate, as the war progressed they were increasingly focused on the brutal implementation of the National Socialist 'Final Solution to the Jewish Problem' – the Holocaust. (Bundesarchiv B 162 Bild-05598 Foto: o. Ang)

captivity deep in the German rear then some sanctuary could sometimes be found with the partisans. Although some early partisan detachments had been formed before their operating areas were overrun by Axis forces, many of the more effective early partisan units were actually sent from behind Soviet lines to engage in attacks against German forces and infrastructure in occupied territory. Regardless of their origin, however, without the necessary organization and support, their efforts were often short-lived and such units were either destroyed or found their way back to Soviet lines within a matter of weeks.

Soon, though, as German forces were held and then pushed back before Rostov, Tikhvin and Moscow in late 1941, attempts were made to better train, organize and equip a reinvigorated Soviet partisan movement. Although in many areas it would be 1943–44 before the partisan movement would have a significant impact on German front-line operations, even during 1942 it was a drain on German resources that the invaders could certainly have done without.

The Wehrmacht (German armed forces) had certainly made some provisions for rear-area security prior to the launch of Operation *Barbarossa*. Security divisions following on behind the front-line forces were, as their name suggests, supposed to provide security in the Wehrmacht's rear. They were not expected to have to perform this security role for long, however. The Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA, or Main Office for Reich Security), the Nazi security organization that was part of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler's Allgemeine-SS (General SS), was slated to take responsibility for conquered territory in areas further behind German lines as the Wehrmacht advanced. Given expectations for a rapid conclusion to the conflict with the Soviet Union, however, Wehrmacht security preparations certainly did not include planning for a protracted anti-partisan war behind German lines.

Despite the many tasks facing them in the summer and autumn of 1941, the Wehrmacht's security divisions were in the main able to deal with the fledgling Soviet partisan threat. They would do so with increasing assistance from forces under the RSHA umbrella, including (but certainly not limited to) the many police units employed in the East. Initial German successes in suppressing the partisan threat would be short-lived, however. In the short-term a zero-tolerance approach towards partisan activity – one that saw many civilians killed as part of punitive expeditions against the partisans or as a warning of the cost of partisan activity in a particular area – was to some extent successful in cowing the civilian population and keeping the partisan threat down. Without civilian support the partisans struggled to operate effectively for any length of time. Often partisan units ran out of supplies; at other times they were destroyed by German security forces – sometimes as a result of betrayal by members of the civilian population hostile to Soviet power.



A Soviet propaganda poster by Tatiana Alekseevna Eremina (1912–95) from 1942, urging partisans in the Axis-occupied territories to 'take revenge without pity' against German troops. As German fortunes at the front deteriorated and day-to-day Wehrmacht strength in occupied territories declined, an increasing number of civilians would join the partisan forces. (Sputnik 136661)

At the same time, however, as German fortunes deteriorated at the front line during the winter of 1941/42, which in turn led to the security divisions having to give up some of their better troops to fight the Red Army at the front, the partisan menace was rejuvenated. Although German security forces could maintain control of many key objectives and transport arteries, an increasing proportion of German-occupied territory was soon either controlled by or under threat from the partisans. By concentrating resources, German anti-partisan forces could launch operations that would temporarily deal with the partisan threat across the swathes of forest and marshland typical of much of the European Soviet Union. The success of such operations was transitory, however, and all too often the threat would re-emerge once the bulk of German forces had moved on. Certainly, German soldiers could not be at ease even in the rear areas of the occupied East.

Nowhere in Soviet territory was this cycle of suppression and re-emergence of the Soviet partisan threat to be repeated more frequently than in parts of north-west Russia, where German security forces and Soviet partisans fought one another from the summer of 1941, through in some cases to the summer of 1944. In the territory of what had been the Soviet Russian Leningrad and Kalinin *oblasti* (regions) prior to the war, and for the Wehrmacht would be the rear areas of Heeresgruppe Nord (Army Group North), a bitter partisan and anti-partisan war took

Territory occupied by 281. Sicherungs-Division, January 1942–late April 1943

MAP KEY

① **1 July–December 1941:** Partisan strength in the area of Lake Polisto and Serbolovskii Forest grows to over 1,000 under the auspices of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade.

② **18 January 1942:** The bulk of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade's combat strength is thrown into an attack on the town of Kholm on the Lovat' River, with the aim of securing the town before the arrival of Red Army units. Although the partisans are briefly able to secure at least part of Kholm and sack the local *Ortskommandantur* (a German administrative command for the town), they are forced to abandon the town later that day before Red Army troops reach the area.

③ **5 February 1942:** Almost half the combat strength of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade is thrown into an attack on what is assumed to be a battalion-strength Latvian garrison at Iasski, but the settlement turns out to be occupied by only a reinforced company-strength force. The partisans inflict significant casualties on the reinforced company of Lettisches Polizei-Bataillon 18 in the village and force the defenders to abandon it temporarily.

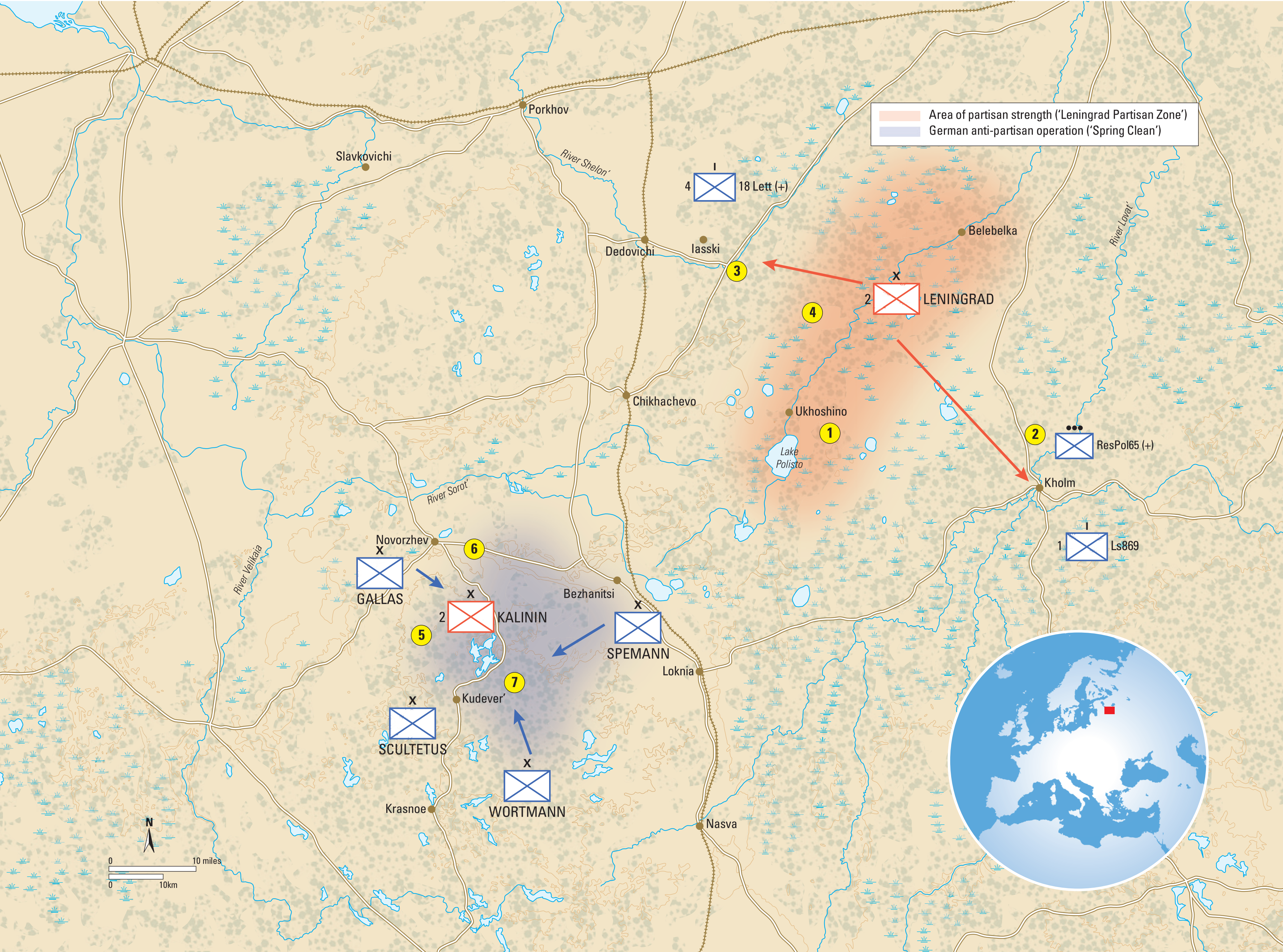
④ **August–September 1942:** In the face of the threat posed by the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade and other partisan brigades within the so-called 'Leningrad Partisan Zone', a series of German anti-partisan operations culminate in the destruction of the zone and the displacement of surviving partisan units from the area by early September 1942.

⑤ **March–April 1943:** A new partisan concentration in the Novorzhev–Kudever' region occupied by 281. Sicherungs-Division prompts the division to draw up plans for another major anti-partisan operation in the area.

⑥ **18 April 1943:** Four brigade-strength *Kampfgruppen* (battlegroups) launch Operation *Spring Clean* against the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade and two other partisan brigades identified in the Novorzhev–Kudever' region.

⑦ **22 April–early May 1943:** By 22 April, the official end date of Operation *Spring Clean*, a considerable proportion of the strengths of three partisan brigades, along with elements of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade, have been encircled and destroyed to the east of Kudever'. Anti-partisan activity continues against surviving partisans into May. Much of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade escapes, but the three other brigades in the area are effectively destroyed as meaningful forces.

place that forms the focus of this book. In this book we will specifically look at the struggle between forces of 281. Sicherungs-Division and units subordinate to it against partisans under the command of the Leningrad and Kalinin Headquarters of the Partisan Movement. Many actions involving German security forces and Soviet partisans were too small in scale even to be documented in more than passing in official documents, but it has proven possible to match Soviet and German records for three episodes in this bitter struggle, each of which was significant in its own ways. Unit records have been matched where possible with personal accounts that add colour to these dramatic episodes. In the first two actions, taking place in early 1942, substantial partisan forces were at least partially successful in achieving their objectives when launching surprise assaults against German-held towns. The attack on Kholm in January 1942 could have had far greater impact had co-ordination between the partisans and Red Army been better. In the third action, Operation *Frühjahrsbestellung* (*Spring Clean*) in April 1943, German troops undertook one of many major anti-partisan operations that caused significant, albeit short-lived, damage to Soviet partisan forces operating against them. These three actions give something of the character of the partisan and anti-partisan war in Soviet territory during the Great Patriotic War, as well as highlighting many of the issues faced by commanders and their subordinates in many similar actions and operations over time.


Area of partisan strength ('Leningrad Partisan Zone')
German anti-partisan operation ('Spring Clean')
Porkhov
Slavkovichi
River Shelon'
4
I
18 Lett (+)
Dedovichi
Iasski
3
Belebelka
X
2
LENINGRAD
4
River Lovat'
Chikhachevo
Ukhoshino
1
2
ResPol65 (+)
Lake Polisto
Kholm
I
1
Ls869
River Sorot'
Novorzhev
6
X
GALLAS
X
2
KALININ
Bezhanitsi
X
SPEMANN
5
Loknia
7
Kudever'
X
SCULTETUS
X
WORTMANN
Krasnoe
Nasva
River Velikaia
N
0
10 miles
0
10km

The Opposing Sides

ORIGINS

For both sides involved in the war in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union the organization of forces deployed against the other was complex, although the principal institutional participants were the Wehrmacht and RSHA for Germany and the Communist Party and Red Army for the Soviet Union.

Soviet

Most of the fighting against German and allied forces in occupied territory was undertaken by the partisans of the Soviet Partisan Movement (*Sovetskoe partizanskoe dvizhenie*). At times the partisans were operating in the same space as specialist Soviet troops such as scouts or saboteurs, although for German forces all Soviet activity on occupied territory tended to be attributed at first to 'partisans' (*Partisanen*). Later in the war, disruptive Soviet activity on German-occupied territory was typically attributed to 'bandits' (*Banden*) – a term that was not seen as conveying legitimacy in the same way as 'partisans'. In this book we are concerned with those described as partisans by the Soviet side, and who made up the vast majority of Soviet combatants in occupied territory.

The Soviet partisan 'movement' – so called to highlight the popular uprising element to Soviet partisan activity – was increasingly well organized as the war progressed. Technically, after the formation of the TsShPD (Tsentral'nii shtab partizanskogo dvizheniia, or Central Headquarters for the Partisan Movement) at the end of May 1942, partisans were nominally under Communist Party control since the TsShPD was a Party organization. The Red Army had considerable influence over the partisan movement, however, not only in providing some key personnel but also in running the movement.

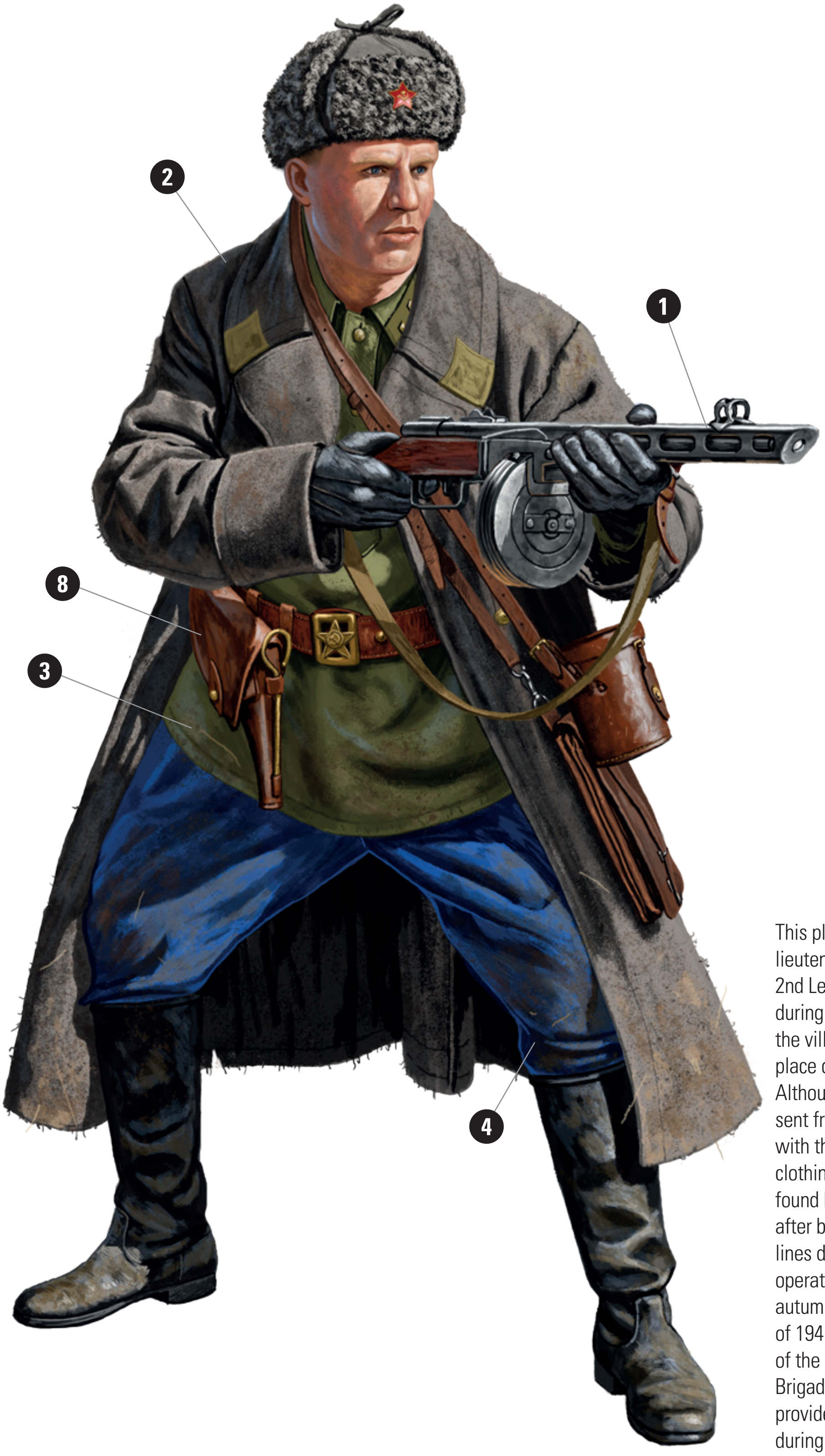
General-Major Aleksei Mikhailovich Pronin, member of the Military Soviet of the North-Western Front, giving a speech to partisans, November 1943. The military soviets (councils) played an important role in co-ordinating the partisan movement to serve the needs of the Red Army, as well as in supplying them with arms, munitions, trained cadres and other essentials. (Sputnik 60108)

Particularly important for the Red Army in making the partisan movement responsive to its needs – for example, for intelligence – were the military soviets (councils) for Soviet fronts. A Soviet front was roughly the equivalent of a German field army, and their military councils were important hybrid military and political bodies. In the case of this book, the military soviet involved was often that for the North-Western Front.

Military soviets were also important to the partisans, because much of their equipment and supplies would be provided by the Red Army. Both military and Communist Party personnel sat on these military soviets, that in many ways were ideal venues for co-ordinating the activities of the partisans with those of the Red Army. Hence, the chain of command for partisan units typically ran from the TsShPD in Moscow, where Stalin's former favourite, Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, was nominally in charge, down through regional partisan headquarters, and through the military soviets of Red Army fronts opposite the German-occupied territory in which partisans were operating. Although Soviet partisan units – increasingly formed into larger so-called 'brigades' – varied widely in terms of their size and organization, they not only increasingly shared a standard chain of command, but also a basic structure that included a brigade-level command organization that controlled a number of subordinate units varying in size from platoon to company strength. Throughout the war – and even after October 1942, when political commissars ceased to have dual command over Red Army units – the political commissars of partisan brigades continued to share operational authority with their commanders. It seems that Stalin and the Soviet political leadership were not willing to trust the commanders of irregular forces operating in the forests and swamps of German-occupied territory in the same way that they were willing to trust Red Army commanders on the front line.

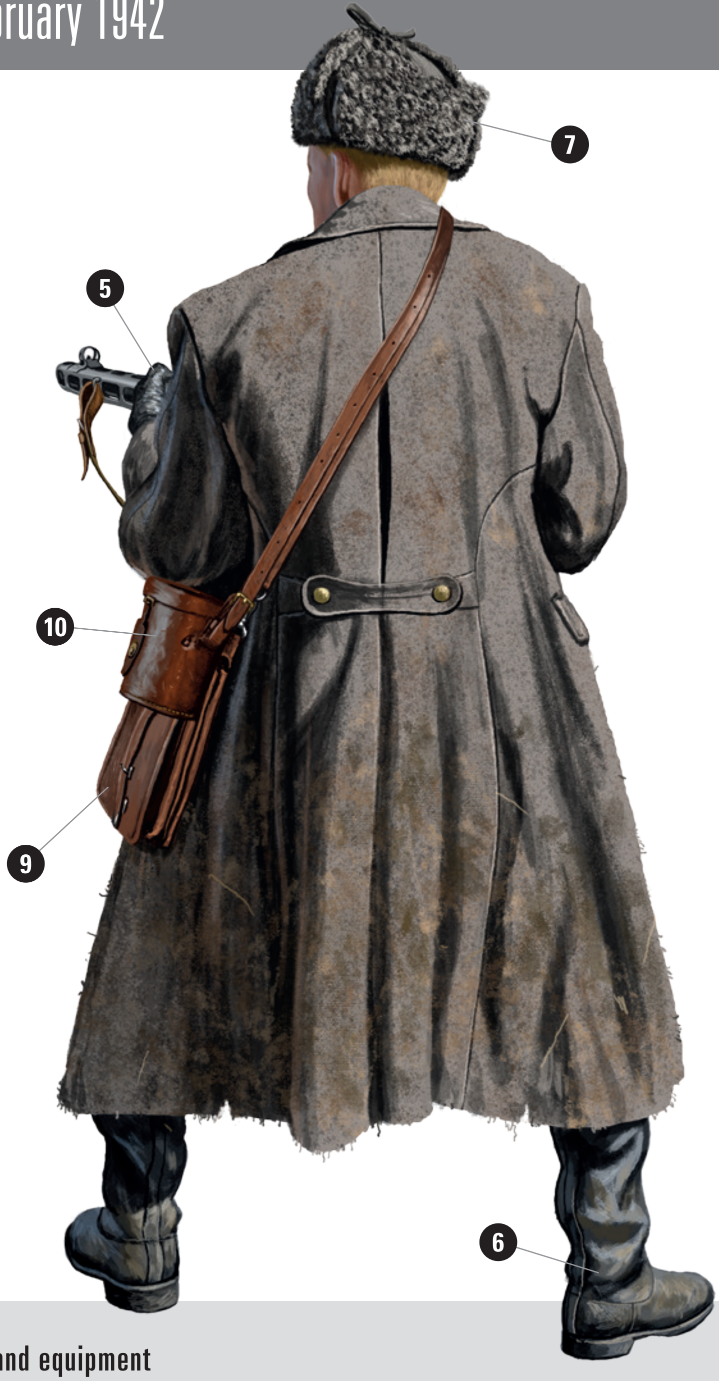
The NKVD had been involved in the establishment of some of the early partisan detachments in 1941, and many NKVD personnel had been involved in detachments not established by the NKVD. With the formation

Lieutenant, 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade



This plate depicts a Red Army lieutenant serving with the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade during the partisan attack on the village of Iasski that took place on 5 February 1942. Although he may have been sent from Soviet lines to serve with the partisans, given his clothing it is more likely that he found his way to the partisans after being cut off from Soviet lines during a Red Army operation sometime during the autumn of 1941 or early winter of 1941/42. Many partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade were still not fully provided with winter clothing during the winter of 1941/42.

Iasski, 5 February 1942



Weapons, dress and equipment

The lieutenant holds a PPSh-41 submachine gun (**1**) with its drum magazine holding 71 rounds of 7.62×25mm ammunition. His submachine gun would have given him a distinct advantage over his adversaries in close-in combat in the fighting for Iasski, where the enemy was armed largely with rifles.

He wears an officer's-pattern greatcoat (**2**) over a Model 1935 tunic (**3**) with collar tabs, buttons and rank insignia all in a drab green as stipulated in an order of August 1941. The subdued collar tabs on the greatcoat were similarly specified because there was concern over officers (known as commanders at the time of the order) being targets for enemy snipers. His officer-model breeches (**4**) have red piping down the leg (not visible here because of the greatcoat). His officer's leather gloves (**5**) are certainly not sufficient for the depths of a Russian winter. He wears officer's boots (**6**) in a soft leather variant. His hat (**7**) is of the popular astrakhan *Shapka-ushanka* type, with a red star at the front.

On his Model 1935 belt he has a holster (**8**) for a Model 1895 Nagant revolver, firing 7.62×38mmR ammunition. He also carries a leather map case (**9**) and binoculars in a leather case (**10**).

of the Communist Party's partisan organization, Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria and his NKVD had to be content with involvement in the partisan movement primarily through the Special Sections of the NKVD that were responsible for counter-intelligence in partisan formations. In 1943 even this role was formally taken away from the NKVD when counter-intelligence was taken over by the Red Army's Political Administration in the form of SMERSH (Smert' spionam! literally translating to 'Death to Spies!'). The formal NKVD presence in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union was by this time largely limited to a few units of the NKVD's OMSBON (Otdel'naia motostrelkovaia brigada osobogo naznacheniia, or Independent Special-Assignment Motor-Rifle Brigade) – one of the precursors to later Soviet SPETZNAZ or special forces.

German

The core strength of the German security forces in the occupied territory of the Soviet Union was made up of the Wehrmacht's security divisions, which were responsible for the security of the army- and army group-level rear areas. From 1942 these troops came under the command of the somewhat clumsily titled *Kommandierender General der Sicherungstruppen und Befehlshaber im Heeresgebiet* (Commanding General for Security Troops and Commander-in-chief of the Army Controlled Areas). At the time of the change in title in 1942 from the shorter *Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiet Nord* (Commander of the Rear Army Area North), this was General der Infanterie Franz von Roques, who would command the Heeresgruppe Nord rear areas until shortly before Operation *Spring Clean*. Under his command were a number of security divisions and other units. One of these divisions was 281. Sicherungs-Division, which had a number of commanders during the occupation, most famously – thanks to his role in the defence of Kholm in January 1942 – Generalleutnant Theodor Scherer. Scherer and his successors exercised their authority over the territory occupied by a security division through *Ortskommandanturen* and *Feldkommandanturen* – local commands for urban and rural areas respectively. From the population centres in which these local commands were based, security forces such as specially created *Jagdkommando* or 'hunting groups' would sally out into the countryside in an attempt to hunt down and destroy partisan units. On occasion, front-line Wehrmacht units were subordinated to the rear-area command for anti-partisan operations. A good example of this would be the role played by 8. Panzer-Division in operations against the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone' during the summer of 1942.

A considerable day-to-day role in rear-area security was played by military police units – both the *Feldgendarmerie* (Field Police) and the *Geheime Feldpolizei* (GFP; Secret Field Police). The former carried out many roles in the supervision of both the native population and German forces, and for many Soviet civilians were often the face of the Wehrmacht. The GFP carried out counter-intelligence functions in the rear areas; for example, being heavily involved in the vetting of native personnel employed by the Wehrmacht. Although the GFP started the war under both Wehrmacht

ABOVE LEFT
Maintaining access to and support from the local population was crucial to the success of partisan operations, and denying the partisans that connection was a core part of German anti-partisan measures. Here, a local collaborator leads members of Polizei-Regiment 9 into a village in 1942. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

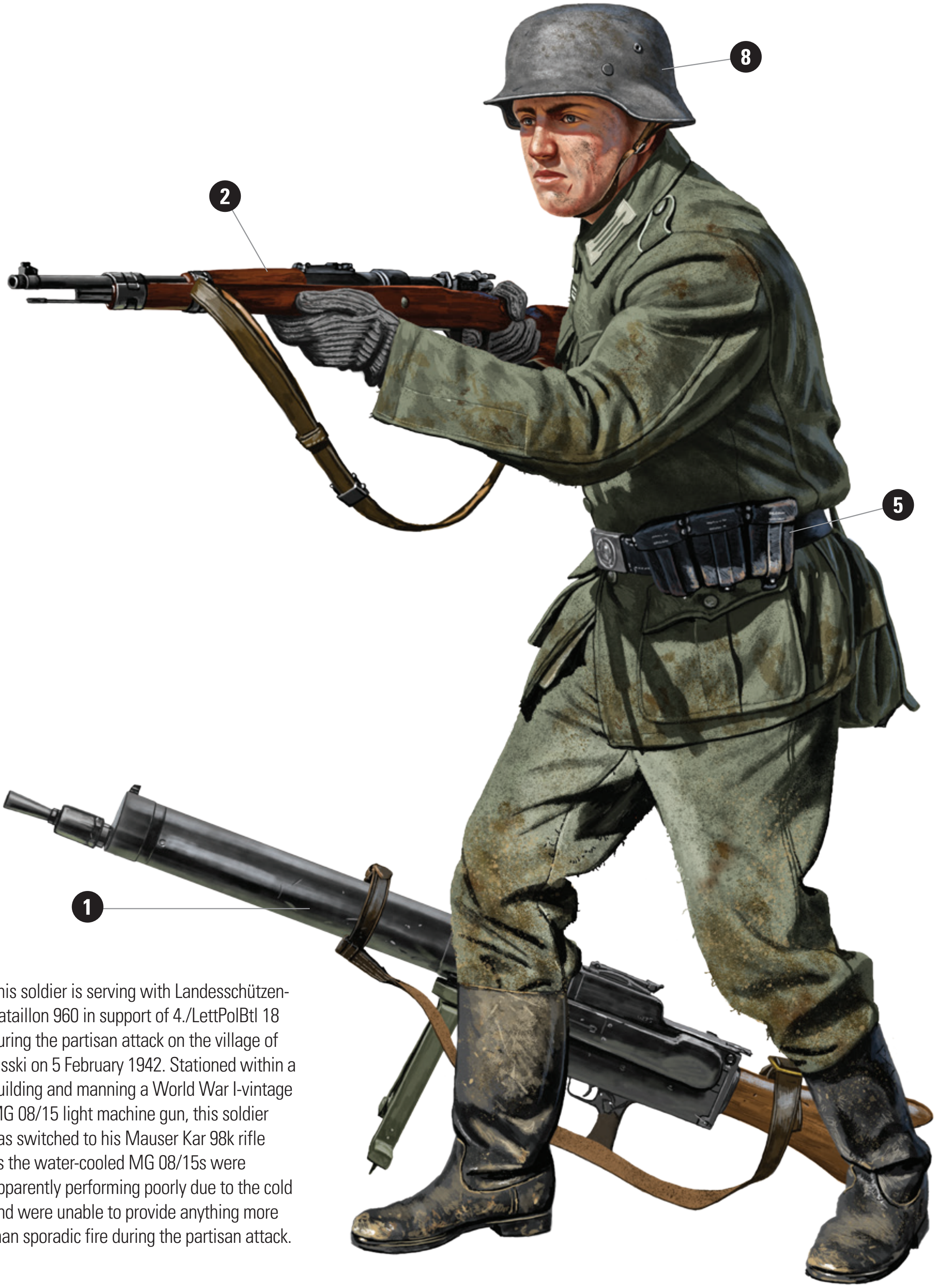
ABOVE RIGHT
Following on from the previous photograph, German forces gather the male population of the village, the trepidation on the faces of the villagers very apparent. Being accused of contact with and assisting the partisans could have serious consequences. Note the mosquito net being worn by the policeman in the centre of the picture – mosquitoes were a scourge for both sides during the summer, particularly so in the more forested and marshy areas. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

administrative and operational control, in 1942 these units, consisting largely of former policemen, came under the administrative control of the RSHA security empire and often worked closely with other elements of the RSHA.

The security divisions and Wehrmacht police were increasingly augmented by a wide range of units, most of which would often be under Wehrmacht operational command, but many otherwise were answerable to the RSHA and ultimately to Himmler. Of those that were under full Wehrmacht control, many units that joined the anti-partisan effort as the war progressed were made up of former Soviet citizens in German service. Some of these units were locally raised, such as the *Einwohner-Kampf-Abteilungen* (EKA; Local Population Combat Units). These units, made up of local personnel remaining in their civilian clothing, were engaged both in securing objectives and in conducting anti-partisan warfare. The Wehrmacht tried to make use of former Red Army soldiers in *Osttruppen* (Eastern Troop) units in the anti-partisan war in the occupied East, most of these units eventually being brought under the umbrella of the so-called ROA (Russkaia osvoboditel'naia armiia, or Russian Liberation Army), headed by former Soviet general Andrei Andreyevich Vlasov. Issues with the reliability of Russian and other Slavic troops meant that many units made up of these national groups were transferred away from the East, some ending up in Normandy at the time of the D-Day landings.

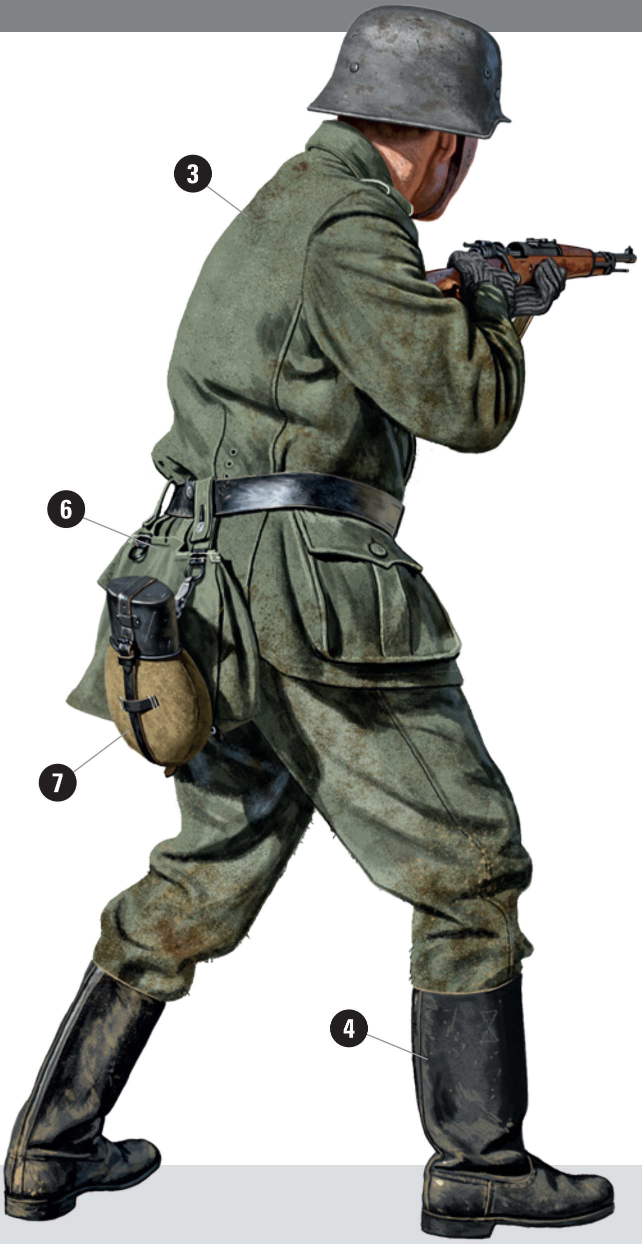
An exception to this trend for redeploying *Osttruppen* units to the West from 1943 was the case of the *Ost-Reiter-Schwadronen* (Eastern Cavalry Squadrons). The reliability of such units, often made up of so-called 'Cossacks' with German leadership elements, seems to have been considerably better than that of other *Osttruppen* units originating from among the pre-1939 Soviet population, and adding a cavalry component to anti-partisan forces proved to be a considerable asset for the Germans. Where horses and sledges or carts provided much of the mobility for anti-partisan forces, mechanized firepower was provided by the small number of *Beute* (captured) tanks serving with security forces in the East. Mobile firepower was also provided by the armoured trains that patrolled railway lines and supported anti-partisan operations.

COMBAT *Soldat,* Landesschützen-Bataillon 960



This soldier is serving with Landesschützen-Bataillon 960 in support of 4./LettPolBtl 18 during the partisan attack on the village of Iasski on 5 February 1942. Stationed within a building and manning a World War I-vintage MG 08/15 light machine gun, this soldier has switched to his Mauser Kar 98k rifle as the water-cooled MG 08/15s were apparently performing poorly due to the cold and were unable to provide anything more than sporadic fire during the partisan attack.

Iasski, 5 February 1942



Weapons, dress and equipment

The MG 08/15 light machine gun (**1**), depicted here with the 100-round drum magazine, was a lighter version of the MG 08 machine gun, shown elsewhere in this book being used by troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 in a sustained-fire role. Although some of Germany's MG 08/15s from World War I were modified during the inter-war period – for example, the bipod being moved forward – weapons with the World War I-era bipod continued to serve during World War II. Although described as light machine guns, these guns weighed in at nearly 20kg, making them far from easy to move in a fluid combat situation such as the fighting for Iasski. The Kar 98k rifle (**2**) was a tried-and-tested weapon, but in many ways it was far from ideal for a fluid engagement fought predominantly at close range. Not only was it over 1.1m long, but it also weighed 3.7kg. The Kar 98k's five-round magazine means this soldier would be at a considerable disadvantage when facing partisans armed with submachine guns during the fighting for the village.

Having removed his greatcoat for greater freedom of movement and because he was firing from a position within a building, the soldier is shown in his M1940 tunic (**3**), typical of those worn by many infantrymen at the time. His boots (**4**) are the late-1939 version of the universal marching boot – shortened to save leather. His remaining equipment is attached to his belt with one set of three rifle-ammunition pouches (**5**), giving him at most 30 rounds of ammunition to hand. Attached to his belt is his bread bag (**6**), with water bottle (**7**) attached. His final piece of equipment is his helmet – a Stahlhelm 40 (**8**), still in its factory-applied rough grey finish, now very much worn.

Police battalions of the RSHA often served under Wehrmacht operational command in the Wehrmacht rear areas, even if such forces were ultimately answerable to Himmler. There were a considerable number of such units in the territory under the administration of Heeresgruppe Nord early in the fighting, although as the war progressed many ended up operating in areas over which the RSHA had its primary security mandate and that were under German civilian administration. Many of the photographs of anti-partisan operations in this book were taken by Wachtmeister der Schutzpolizei der Reserve (Reserve Sergeant) Otto Bartsch, a member of one of these police battalions serving in the region on which this study focuses. Bartsch served for much of the war with Polizei-Regiment 9 – initially known as Reserve-Polizei-Regiment 9 and later as SS-Polizei-Regiment 9 – which operated in the southern sector of Heeresgruppe Nord's rear areas during much of 1942 and 1943. Later in the war it was incorporated into SS-Polizei-Regiment 16, in which unit Bartsch was serving on 14 July 1944 when he was killed during fighting in Vilnius in Lithuania as German forces in the north were pushed back into the Baltic republics. Different elements of the regiment were attached to 281. Sicherungs-Division at different times; for example, one of its battalions participated in Operation *Spring Clean*.

Himmler had managed to secure a certain degree of autonomy for his forces even when they were operating in Wehrmacht rear areas. Although prior to Operation *Barbarossa* the Wehrmacht was given control over 'military operations' in the rear areas under its control, the RSHA had secured 'special powers' to deal with threats to state security, which included Jews and soon the prosecution of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Problem' – the Holocaust. The *Einsatzgruppen*, which would quickly come to be associated with the extermination of Jews in the field, operated in Wehrmacht-controlled areas with their own state security mandate. Elements of Einsatzgruppe A operated in the territory of Heeresgruppe Nord during the occupation, and co-operated with the Wehrmacht in dealing with the partisan threat. The fact that there were relatively few Jews in the Russian territory under the authority of Heeresgruppe Nord tempered *Einsatzgruppe* interest in the region after it became apparent that Leningrad – with its larger Jewish population – would not be captured. Elsewhere, Wehrmacht participation in the conduct of the Final Solution varied wildly from enthusiasm to reluctance. This book is primarily concerned with RSHA troops participating in Wehrmacht-run anti-partisan operations where a significant Jewish population was not a factor.

In the northern and central regions of occupied Soviet territory the RSHA deployed large numbers of police troops drawn from the Baltic republics. These troops were used not only for action on their home territories for the security of which the RSHA had full responsibility, but also in the north-western Russian rear areas of the Wehrmacht and in Belorussia. Such troops proved far more reliable than *Osttruppen* units, and were employed extensively. For specific operations, Wehrmacht commanders could also sometimes draw on elements of the Waffen-SS, whose troops were typically better equipped, trained and motivated than their police compatriots. 2. SS-Infanterie-Brigade is a good example of such a unit operating in the territory of Heeresgruppe Nord.

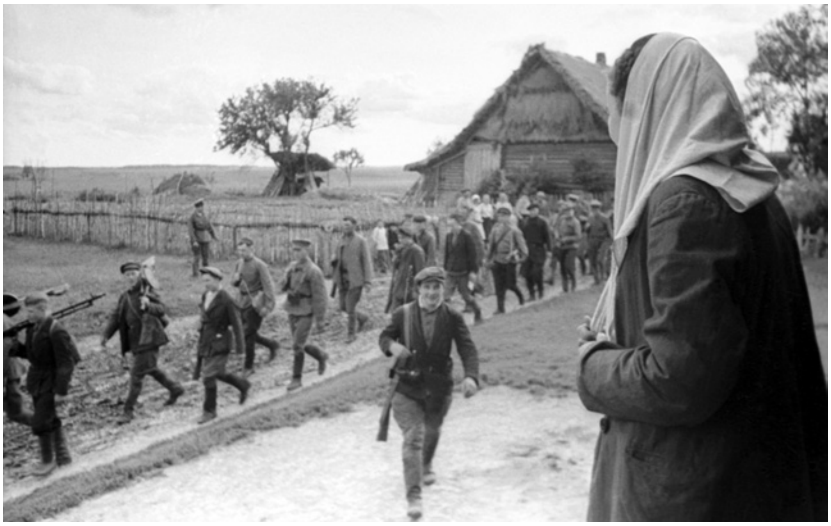
RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Soviet

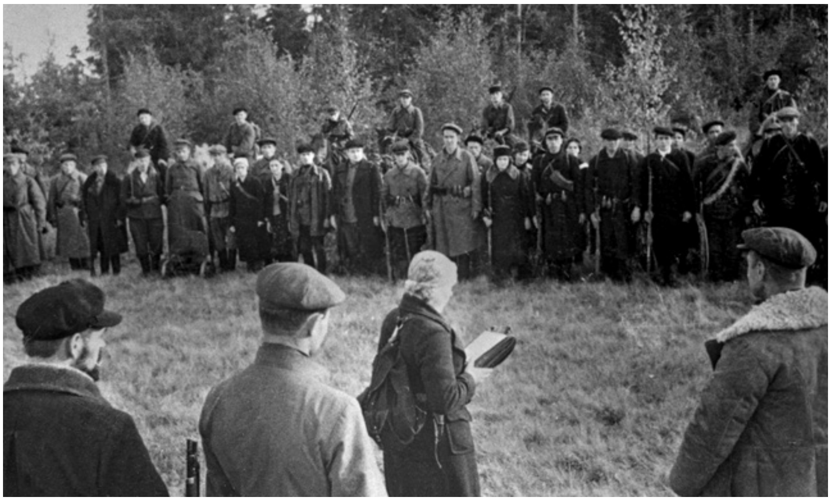
On the Soviet side, recruitment was much more varied than for German forces. Very early partisan units often consisted of local Communist Party and state functionaries who had been told to engage in partisan warfare rather than retreat with the Red Army. Partisan ranks soon included an increasing number of Red Army men who had escaped from PoW camps or had been left behind during the retreat. Red Army political commissars were ordered to engage in partisan warfare along with their units if they were cut off behind German lines, and were soon very much inclined to do so when it became common knowledge that if they surrendered they would likely be executed by German forces in accordance with the infamous Kommissarbefehl (Commissar Order) issued on 6 June 1941 prior to the start of Operation *Barbarossa*.

Many of these early partisan units did not survive the first winter of the war, and were replaced by units whose core personnel had been recruited in the Soviet rear – members often serving as partisans rather than in the Red Army or being Red Army personnel attached to partisan units. They would be joined over time by large numbers of young and middle-aged men from their operating regions who had not been conscripted into the Red Army, along with significant numbers of typically younger women who had remained in occupied territory. For many young men and women, joining the partisans was an alternative to forced labour service in Germany as *Ostarbeiter* ('Eastern workers'); for others, it was a patriotic or even a practical response to German occupation and punitive measures against the civilian population. As the war progressed, increasing numbers of those who collaborated with the Germans would go over to the partisans in order to earn forgiveness for their betrayal of the Motherland in collaborating with Germany.

The first partisans – often middle-aged Communist Party and state officials – at best had received basic military training in their youth when they were conscripted into the Red Army or served with the Soviet territorial militia forces. Those who found their way into the Red Army from units



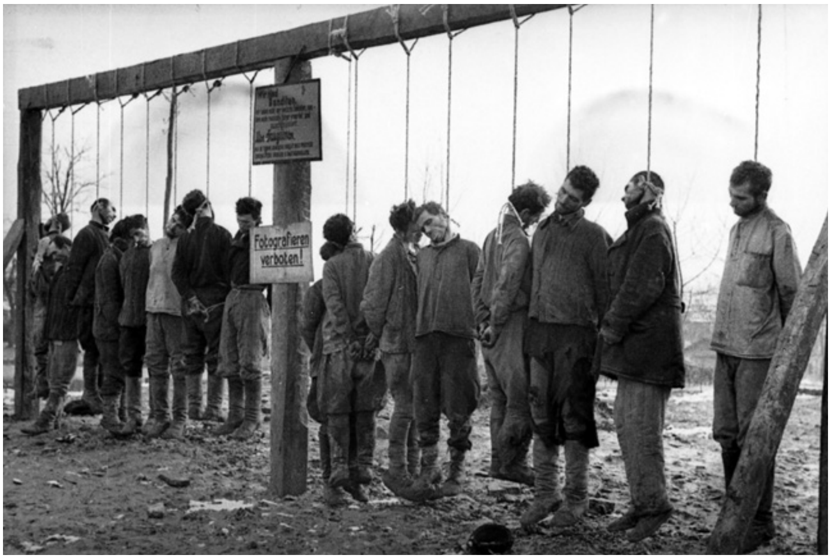
Leningrad partisans on the march through a village in German-occupied territory, 1943. The young partisan in the foreground is heading to greet his mother in what we assume was his home village. Of note are the uniformed figures mixed in among those in civilian clothing, and the captured German MG 34 machine gun being carried by the partisan on the far left of the photograph. (TASS via Getty Images)



A partisan of the Pskov area gives an oath of loyalty in front of her comrades, October 1941. Of note is the youth of many of the partisans drawn from the local population, their civilian clothing suited to autumn weather, and that they are largely armed with rifles. Such units would struggle during the winter of 1941/42 without better clothing, arms and equipment. (Sputnik 606705)

that did not make it back to Soviet lines or escaped from captivity did at least have more recent basic military training and even combat experience. As the war with Germany approached, the basic tactical training provided in the Red Army was improved in the light of poor performance in the Winter War with Finland in 1939–40, and became arguably much more practical and realistic than had previously been the case. As the war approached, however, and during the early phases of the war, Red Army training was often truncated in order to get troops into combat as soon as possible. Later in the war, although the very young who joined the partisans often had little or no military training before becoming partisans, their leaders in the partisan movement were more likely to be military professionals with not only military training but also some training specific to partisan warfare.

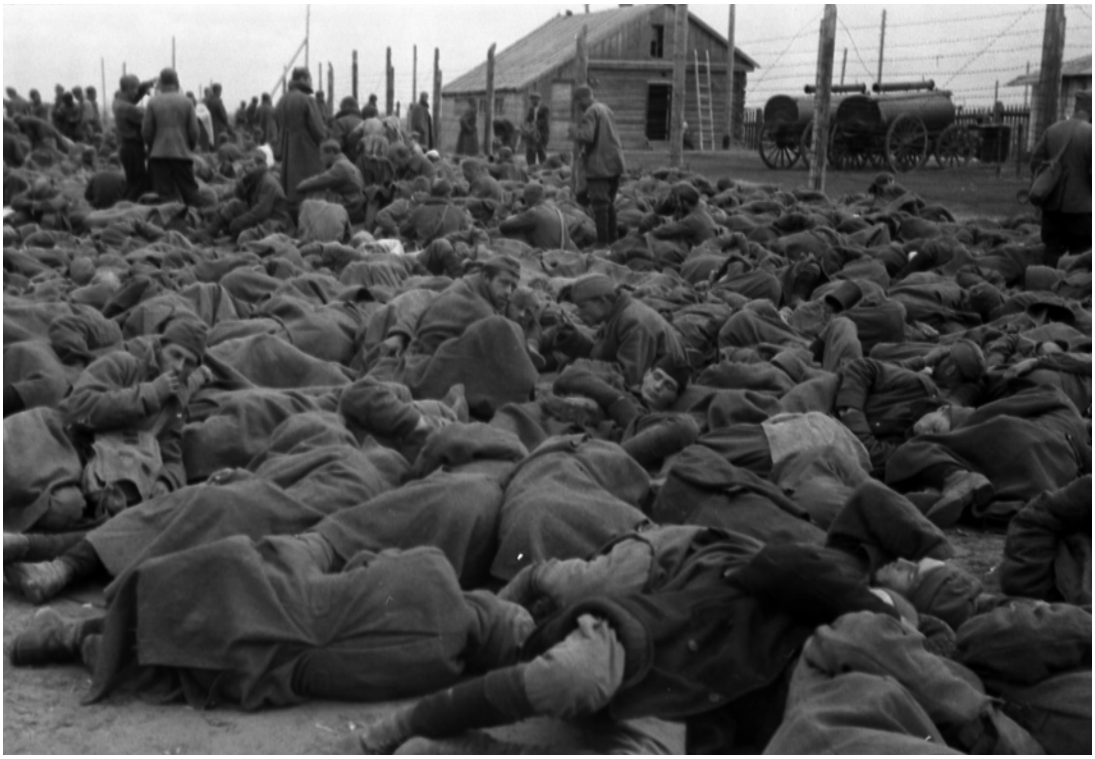
Training in partisan warfare was provided through training organizations under the auspices of the TsShPD and its regional subsidiaries. Specialists



'Partisans', executed by hanging, January 1943. The top sign reads 'We are partisans. We have not only killed and robbed German soldiers, but also Russian citizens'. The lower sign reads 'Taking photographs is forbidden!' For the male population of the German-occupied territories in particular, it was increasingly difficult not to take sides in the war being fought around them. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-031-2436-05A Foto: Koch, Helmut) in communications and explosives sent from Soviet lines could impart at least some of their knowledge to eager young local recruits, who, when time and German forces allowed, were given basic military training within their partisan unit. Partisan units were sometimes forced to make the dangerous passage through the front line into the Soviet rear, such movements providing an ideal opportunity for training and re-equipping.

German

When Germany and its allies invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the security divisions that accompanied the front-line forces were in essence light infantry divisions, with personnel and training roughly equivalent to that of regular infantry divisions albeit with a high proportion of reservists. A regimental-strength core of more capable troops was supposed to provide a strike element for such divisions, although these troops were increasingly committed to front-line combat as German fortunes waned. In addition, as the war progressed, the quality of troops allocated to the security divisions in many aspects deteriorated far more rapidly than for front-line Wehrmacht forces. Younger, physically fitter troops tended to be allocated to front-line units, although anecdotally it is possible to argue that the older troops that tended to be deployed in the rear brought – at least in some instances – a maturity to the rear areas that was of some value in dealings with the civilian population. *Osttruppen* and the more active locally recruited units of Soviet collaborators were more likely to contain a greater number of younger members, where they drew from PoW camps and those members



The German *Dulag* or PoW transit camp at Porkhov in the Leningrad Region in 1941. Such camps were the responsibility of the security divisions. Conditions were clearly squalid, and prisoners would frequently escape. Many escaped prisoners would find their way into partisan detachments. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-390-1240-21 Foto: Dietrich)

Members of Polizei-Bataillon 319 in the Staraia Russa area, *c.*Easter 1942. Especially so earlier in the war, the police battalions played a significant role in the anti-partisan war in the army- and army group-level rear areas of Heeresgruppe Nord. (www.militaria-archive.com Pol-Btl-319-001)

of the local population who had not been drafted into the Red Army before the area was occupied.

In many ways the recruitment picture was similar for the forces of the RSHA. Members of police battalions and regiments were typically older than their Waffen-SS counterparts. In this book, however, when we are concerned with police troops, there is little evidence that age led to greater discretion in dealings with the local population where the 'Nazification' of police units was arguably greater than for their Wehrmacht counterparts.

While many partisans were often better trained as the war went on, the training provided to German security forces deteriorated. Not only was the Wehrmacht's replacement system increasingly stretched as the war progressed, but time for training in the field was increasingly limited as a smaller core of the security divisions faced a growing partisan threat. Little German training – even for officers – was focused specifically on anti-partisan warfare, even if guidelines for the conduct of partisan warfare were developed and refined as the war progressed. *Osttruppen* often had some military training from their Red Army days, supplemented by limited training with new equipment and in German practices. Similarly, security forces from the Baltic republics often contained personnel with at least some prior military experience, even if that experience was of training geared to front-line combat rather than anti-partisan warfare.

EQUIPMENT AND FIREPOWER

As with recruitment and training, German forces started the war in a better position than their partisan opponents in terms of equipment and firepower. By 1943–44 the partisans were certainly in a much better relative position than they had been back in 1941, but they were still all too frequently out-gunned when facing German forces *en masse*. The partisans could gain the advantage when attacking isolated German outposts, however, particularly when such outposts were manned by local collaborators.

Soviet

Unsurprisingly, the Soviet partisans were far less uniformly dressed and equipped than the security forces facing them. The first partisan units, made up of personnel from the local government and Communist Party apparatus of areas overrun by German forces, were typically dressed in civilian clothing. At most, the local NKVD head might have remained in uniform, his service revolver being one of the few modern weapons available to a unit otherwise equipped with antiquated pieces that had often been used for hunting prior to being turned on the Germans. A significant proportion of partisans remained in civilian clothing throughout the war, with a large proportion in civilian clothing during the final months of the Axis occupation. During this period, large numbers of local civilians joined the partisans in the face of German scorched-earth policies and before the imminent arrival of the Red Army, with many not even receiving a weapon. By this stage of the war, however, they were being supervised by an increasing number of officers and other personnel in uniform – sometimes unmodified Red Army uniform, but often with touches peculiar to the partisans. For example, many partisan officers chose to wear a *kubanka* fur hat with a cross on the top.

As the partisans became more uniform in their appearance, their equipment also improved. Weapons and other equipment could be brought by partisans from behind Soviet lines, airdropped or flown in, or captured from the Germans and their allies. Submachine guns became increasingly prevalent among the partisans as the war progressed, as they did in the Red Army. The number of light and heavy machine guns also increased in number in partisan units, along with mortars. Although some partisan units were able to acquire anti-tank guns and sometimes even the odd armoured vehicle, such heavier equipment was not the norm and often did not last long in the circumstances in which partisans operated. In terms of firepower, if they could not fully exploit local superiority and surprise in a timely manner, then the partisans were likely to be outgunned. German forces could often quickly bring heavier firepower to bear than was available to the partisans, given, for example, their greater numbers of sustained-fire automatic weapons such

Although weapons could be brought in from Soviet lines by foot or air, throughout the war partisans were to some extent reliant on weapons captured from German forces. Here, a young Leningrad-Region partisan aims a captured MG 08/15 light machine gun, while his rifle-armed compatriot vigilantly looks on. (Sovfoto/UIG via Getty Images)

A Maxim Model 1910 heavy machine gun being manoeuvred by young Leningrad Region partisans in 1942. While providing a valuable sustained-fire capability, heavy machine guns such as this example were a considerable hindrance to movement, and it was difficult to maintain a supply of ammunition for them. (Sovfoto/UIG via Getty Images)

as the MG 34 and MG 42 machine guns, and even the antiquated World War I-era MG 08 heavy machine guns and MG 08/15 light machine guns often used in the rear areas.

German

The German security divisions that crossed the Soviet border on 22 June 1941 at the start of Operation *Barbarossa* were, as already noted, in essence light infantry divisions. As such, they lacked the heavy equipment, and in particular the full artillery allocation, provided to a standard German infantry division. They were otherwise equipped and dressed as their counterparts in the regular infantry divisions. They were often supported by tanks captured by German forces in the West during the successful campaigns of 1939–40; although now inadequate for use at the front line, these vehicles were a useful asset against lightly armed partisans. German security divisions could also receive armoured support – and enhanced firepower – from the armoured trains serving in the rear areas. Air support was, however, something of a luxury for the security divisions. Although limited air support was certainly made available for major anti-partisan operations, it was not typically something upon which the security forces could rely.

Osttruppen units, including local non-uniformed collaborators in the partisan war, were in a very different position to their Wehrmacht compatriots in terms of equipment, often provided from captured stocks. *Osttruppen* were provided with German uniforms, with their inferior status as *Osttruppen* initially indicated not only by their insignia, but also by the absence of the German eagle above the right breast pocket. Local collaborators in civilian attire were at best identified by armbands. Local collaborators – for example, of the EKA – were at the back of the queue regarding equipment, and typically equipped only with antiquated rifles dating from previous wars.

While the few Waffen-SS units fighting the partisans were typically well-equipped, their police counterparts often had to make do with older German and sometimes even captured equipment. While both were often dressed similarly to their Wehrmacht equivalents, the SS collar flashes of the

ABOVE LEFT
Here, members of Polizei-Regiment 9 engage partisans with a heavy mortar during the winter of 1942/43. The fact that German forces often had a near-monopoly on indirect-fire capabilities gave them a considerable advantage. The mortar was of particular value in forested terrain. Note the sledge for transporting the weapon and munitions. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

ABOVE RIGHT
Troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 engage partisans during the winter of 1942/43, this time with a PaK 36 anti-tank gun. Although by this stage of the war the PaK 36 was of increasingly limited utility against Soviet tanks, its high-explosive capabilities were still of value against partisans often lacking suitable weapons with which to respond effectively. Once again note the sledge for winter transport. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

Waffen-SS became something of a giveaway to the partisans and the local population that they were dealing with something a little different from the usual security troops. For the uninitiated, RSHA police troops were not as easily distinguishable from their Wehrmacht counterparts, as their appearance was very similar despite differences in uniform colours and insignia. Unlike Waffen-SS units, the police battalions and regiments of the RSHA were heavily reliant on the Wehrmacht for fire support when operating in the army- and army group-level rear areas near the front line, although even they had their own captured tanks and armoured cars at regimental level.

LOGISTICS AND MOBILITY

While logistically and in terms of transport the Wehrmacht security divisions and their allied forces were not a priority for the German war machine, they were nevertheless typically in a far better position in terms of supply and mobility than their partisan opponents. Both sides were, however, all too often forced to turn to the civilian population for winter clothing, food and increasingly scarce horses. While these items were more likely to be willingly handed over to the partisans, there were many occasions when partisans ‘requisitioned’ items from a civilian population under duress. German ‘requisitioning’ became increasingly widespread and systematic as the war progressed, with a special organization within the Wehrmacht led by Wirtschaftsstab Ost (Economic Headquarters East) handling the acquisition of material goods from the occupied territories.

Soviet

The early partisan units were all too often made up of overweight officials far from physically fit enough to engage in partisan warfare. Later in the war the average age of the partisans dropped considerably, however. This drop in average age was just as well, since the partisans did not have the benefit of the railways to move over larger distances. Although partisan units made considerable use of horses for scouting and to pull sledges and carts, the latter were an encumbrance

Partisans were heavily reliant on horses for mobility. Here, partisans gather bread and other foodstuffs from a village during the late summer of 1942, possibly within the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone'. Like their German opponents, the partisans often had a column of horses and sledges or carts following on behind their combat forces. For the partisans in particular, this 'tail' was often a liability in slowing them down, and all too often captured by German forces during anti-partisan operations. (Sputnik 1769)

that was not always suited to escape during an anti-partisan operation and where the partisans were forced to seek shelter in the most impassable terrain. As a rule, the better a partisan unit's mobility and supply, the more vulnerable it was in terms of being located and hunted down. Not only were columns of sledges and carts vulnerable to German action and relatively easily located, but so were the partisan base camps from which larger and better-supplied partisan units could operate.

Perhaps the most vulnerable partisan camps were those with airstrips, providing partisans with a convenient means for resupply and communication with the Soviet rear, but also providing a marker for German reconnaissance and an objective needing defending. Only when partisans could establish 'partisan zones' – large areas under partisan 'control' – were such 'installations' viable. During much of the war, however, by the time the partisans were that successful in a particular area, they could expect to attract the attention of a major German force. Partisan leaders undoubtedly struggled more than their German opponents with shortages of ammunition and other supplies.

German

For German security forces, and indeed for the Wehrmacht as a whole on the Eastern Front, the key element of the system of logistics and mobility was the railway. Many of the efforts of the security forces were expended on

The German security forces were also heavily reliant on horses to provide mobility, including moving supplies, heavier weapons and the wounded. Here, troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 with horses and sledges are engaged in a '*Säuberungs*' or 'cleansing' action after an anti-partisan operation. The civilian population regularly paid a high price for partisan activity in their locality. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

The leadership of the 5th Leningrad Partisan Brigade, wider partisan movement and underground in the Luga area of the Leningrad Region. On the left is commissar Ivan Sergunin, and in the centre the brigade's commander, Colonel Konstantin Dionis'evich Karitskii. The third figure is a local Communist Party leader. For most of the war the partisan movement was in the first instance the responsibility of the Communist Party, and political control of such forces operating in German-occupied territory was a major concern. Although dual command between political commissars and commanders was abolished in the Red Army in October 1942, it remained in the partisan movement throughout the war. *Kubanka* fur hats, in evidence here, were popular among partisan leaders. (TASS via Getty Images)

defending the railway lines, and in particular the bridges over which they ran. Once German forces moved away from the railheads, the infantry often had to walk, although sledges and carts in the winter were frequently used to move men as well as their equipment. Cavalry units – in the territory of Heeresgruppe Nord, primarily the *Ost-Reiter-Schwadronen* and *-Abteilungen* (Eastern cavalry squadrons and battalions) – provided greater mobility, as did the few outdated tanks, but these units were relatively few in number. Early in the war it was intended that rapid-response forces would make use of bicycles to enhance their mobility, but experience seems to have shown that this was far more viable in the West than in the East where few roads were paved. As the war progressed, the physical fitness of many security troops was clearly much lower than it had been at the beginning of the war, and particularly so where the best security troops ended up fighting at the front.

COMMAND, CONTROL AND COMMUNICATIONS

Soviet

As was the case for other aspects of their supply, during the early part of the war the partisans were certainly inadequately provided with the means to command and control forces available to them. At the beginning of the conflict, most partisan units lacked any radio communications. As the war progressed, considerable effort was expended in order to provide partisan units with radio sets, where as a minimum each brigade could expect to have a radio set for communication with Soviet lines. As in the case of improved supply, however, better provision of communications equipment later in the war could sometimes prove

A particularly well-equipped partisan unit operating in occupied territory opposite the Red Army's North-Western Front in February 1943. Smaller 'partisan' units sent from Soviet lines and tasked with sabotage and reconnaissance might each have had their own radio set by this stage of the war, but the partisan brigades typically only had a single set primarily for communication with their superiors in Soviet territory. (Sputnik 851357)

German forces often enjoyed a firepower advantage over the partisans. In this picture, members of Polizei-Regiment 9 engage partisans with a heavy machine gun during the winter of 1942/43. The far greater numbers of light and heavy machine guns available to German security forces would often give them a considerable advantage at all but the shortest ranges. Their former-Soviet colleagues were not necessarily as well provided for in this regard. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

to be something of a poisoned chalice. Not only was the portability of larger radio sets limited, but they were all too often used by German forces to locate partisan headquarters through the interception and triangulation of transmissions.

The absence of viable communications both within partisan brigades and with the Red Army and Soviet rear was, however, a far greater limitation than any issues relating to the possession of radio equipment. The failure of elements of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade to co-ordinate their attack on Kholm with the Red Army, discussed later in this study, is an excellent example of how poor communications could hamper the effectiveness of Soviet partisan units. Certainly, one of the key functions of partisan units from late 1942 onwards was to gather intelligence that might be of value to the Red Army. Only with radio communications could this information – be it provided by partisans, spies or other informants – be relayed in a timely manner. At least later in the war, as communications improved, the partisans were provided with better trained and more capable military leaders who could use improved communications to make the best use of the forces under their command. Even so, despite the nature of partisan warfare suiting decentralization, as the war progressed the Soviet regime tended towards greater centralization of the partisan movement. Certainly, Red Army scouts and saboteurs were more likely to be given more leeway in their activities than their partisan counterparts.

German

While not as well provided for as their front-line counterparts – particularly as the war progressed – command, control and communications was an aspect of operations at which German forces excelled. Compared to the partisans this was in part because of the availability of equipment, allowing German forces to use both the telephone and telegraph to supplement radio communications, though this was subject to the partisans cutting the necessary lines. This was also, however, due to the fact that the much vaunted *Auftragstaktik* or 'mission command' of the German armed forces was suited to a decentralized security system that had to be able to react quickly and with or without direction from above to partisan movement and attacks. Comparison between German and Soviet archival sources certainly suggests that junior German commanders were far more likely to be given scope to exercise their initiative than their partisan equivalents, particularly so as the war progressed.

For the partisans, holding base areas, sometimes large enough to be called partisan 'zones', had some advantages – in particular access to the civilian population, food and shelter. It also gave them a defined area into which supplies could be airdropped or sometimes even flown into makeshift airstrips. Here, airdropped munitions are being collected by women in the late summer of 1942, probably within the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone'. (Sputnik 63664)

DOCTRINE AND TACTICS

Soviet

It is fair to say that by the early to mid-1930s the Soviet Union had made meaningful preparations for the conduct of partisan warfare, building on the experience of irregular warfare in the Russian Civil War (1918–21). For example, supply caches had been established for the use of partisan units in the event of foreign invasion. Such activity, however, being difficult to control from the centre, was anathema to Stalin's regime, which sought to centralize control. At the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet regime had little choice but to leave partisans to their own devices, supervised where possible by a political commissar. Guided by limited instructions on how to engage in acts of sabotage and other subversion, the partisans were often poorly motivated, relatively unpredictable and difficult to direct. Small and poorly equipped early partisan units – where actively fighting the enemy – engaged in the sort of hit-and-run tactics that are perhaps more typically associated with partisans than the larger-scale operations soon to come. German sources for 1941 highlight in particular such activities as the ambush of small German convoys or lone vehicles and the assassination of those collaborating with the Germans.

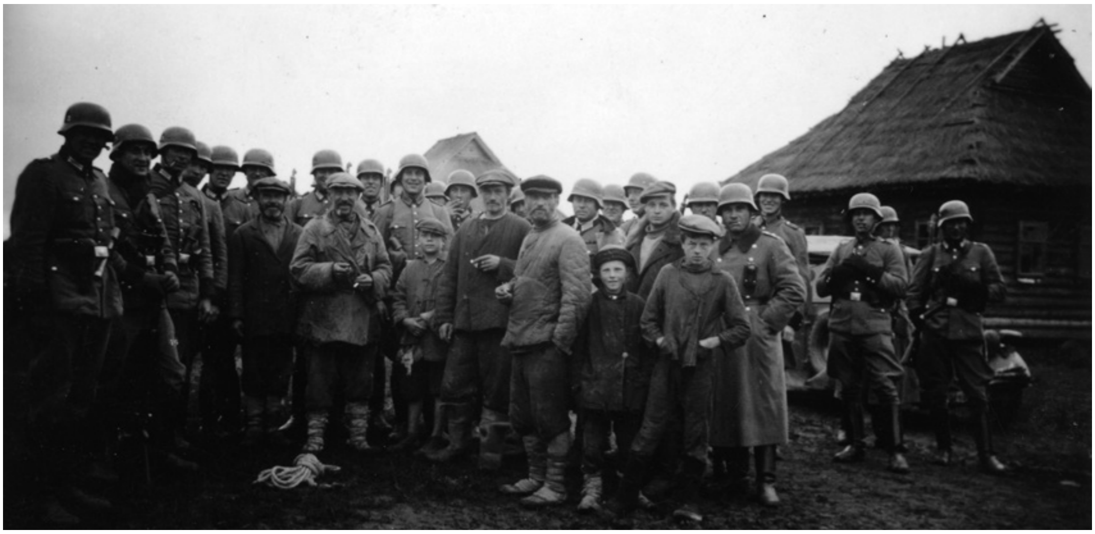
Where possible the Soviet regime took opportunities to centralize command and control of the partisan movement and make it more of a regular force in the enemy rear than the popular image of the partisan or guerrilla might suggest. Part of this process was achieved by amalgamating smaller units, and as the war progressed ever larger partisan units became part of brigades. By growing in size, such units could attack and destroy increasingly significant German and collaborator garrisons, but their enlargement made the Soviet units easier

OPPOSITE
In addition to often having superior firepower – particularly at longer ranges – German forces enjoyed a considerable advantage in terms of communications. Although ranges for radios were often limited in the dense forest and marshland of the Leningrad Region, they nevertheless provided a capacity for co-ordination between units that the partisans typically lacked. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

Maintaining base areas, even partisan 'zones', meant that the partisans now had territory to defend. Here, a partisan gives instruction to locals of a partisan 'self-defence unit' in the late summer of 1942 in the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone'. The chances of them successfully defending their homes in the face of a major German anti-partisan operation were very low. (Sputnik 63667)

to track and encircle than would otherwise have been the case. Smaller and often more capable units were detached from partisan brigades for more covert assignments, but nevertheless returned to their brigades. The larger partisan units became, the larger grew their baggage trains and their demands for food and ammunition. For the partisans, it is certainly fair to say that ambition bit the nails of their success.

Politically and materially, in some ways it made sense for partisans to try to control whole swathes of German-occupied territory while operating from a partisan *krai* (zone). From such areas they could, for example, obtain food and – in the winter in particular – shelter. By controlling such zones, however, the partisans further limited perhaps their key asset – their ability to 'disappear' into almost impenetrable terrain when faced with superior force. Instead, at times partisan units fought one-sided battles to defend territory. Such was undoubtedly the case when German forces were able to gather sufficient resources in the late summer of 1942 to destroy the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone', from which the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade had launched its attack on Kholm in January 1942. Such major German anti-partisan operations led inevitably to the fragmentation of partisan brigades, whose constituent parts were more likely to survive when operating independently, but less likely to be able to engage in the sort of major operations that brought prestige and looked good on maps back in Leningrad. In many ways the so-called 'War of the Rails' in the summer of 1943, during which partisan attacks could be as small in scale as sabotaging a small section of railway track in the hope of slowing down German resupply to the front, suited the partisans better than the massing of forces sufficient to attack a fortified and garrisoned German-controlled town.

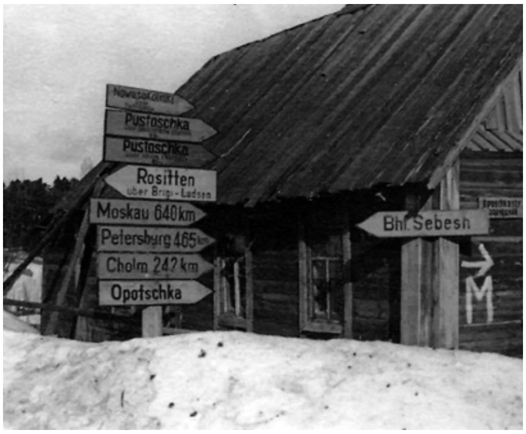


The cost of being seen to be aiding the enemy: members of Polizei-Bataillon 319 pose with local collaborators, their hangman's noose tossed casually on the ground in front of them. Early in the war a zero-tolerance approach towards contact with the partisans might have intimidated the local population into submission, but it would soon become counter-productive in many instances where partisan strength was high. (www.militaria-archive.com Pol-Btl-319-002)

German

Neither side in the war behind the Eastern Front went into the partisan war particularly well prepared to fight it. Fortunately for the Wehrmacht, elements of its doctrine – such as *Auftragstaktik* – were well suited to this form of warfare. Relating to this, the decentralization of fire support in the Wehrmacht was also very much suited to anti-partisan operations. Initially, German zero tolerance towards partisan activity, for which the civilian population paid a heavy price in terms of reprisals and during the '*Säuberung*' of areas in which partisans operated, seems to have paid off. It certainly seems that early in the war, when they had a meaningful choice, many peasants chose not to join or support the partisans in areas where it looked like Germany was winning and the price for supporting the partisans was so high. Once it became apparent that Soviet defeat was not imminent and the partisan movement grew in strength, however, zero tolerance towards partisan activity in a particular area arguably became counter-productive. Alongside other unpopular policies, ruthless anti-partisan measures pushed civilians into the hands of the partisans. The initial German policy of zero tolerance does seem to have softened as the war progressed, where, for example, the '*Säuberung*' of an area in which partisans were operating often became less indiscriminate. Nevertheless, the change in tone of German anti-partisan measures was relative rather than absolute.

For the Germans, there were never enough troops effectively to control the vast expanses of occupied territory – and certainly not to protect every kilometre of railway track or telephone cable. From early on in the occupation, decisions had to be made as to which towns to garrison and bridges to defend in earnest, and which areas would have to be denied to the partisans for at least some of the time using mobile forces. The use of locally recruited forces might provide some dissuasion against partisan incursions, but less so as time went on and partisan strength increased and the prospect of a German victory seemed to decrease. As a general trend, increasingly small garrisons in outlying areas had to be



ABOVE LEFT
The '*Säuberung*' or 'cleansing' of a partisan-'infested' area served a number of purposes for German forces. Not only did it act as a punishment or warning to the local population for assisting or tolerating a partisan presence, but it also served to deny the partisans access to replacement personnel, supplies and winter shelter. Once again, it was the civilian population that paid the heaviest price. Here, troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 march past or leave a burning village. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

ABOVE RIGHT
Another photo taken by Otto Bartsch of Polizei-Regiment 9 during 1943. The distances on the signs highlight the sheer size of the occupied territories, with the town of Kholm (Cholm), at the front line, still in German hands at this point. Kholm would not be liberated by Soviet forces until February 1944. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

cut in the face of diminishing resources and increasing partisan strength. Nevertheless, although for much of the time the hinterland did not see a German presence, when the partisan threat grew large enough to draw Axis attention, then Wehrmacht security forces and allied units would descend on an area with a vengeance.

There was a significant difference between reacting to a partisan action and a concerted anti-partisan operation. The former rarely led to significant partisan casualties, because partisan forces typically could simply withdraw into the forest or marshland. All too often in such circumstances, and particularly early in the war, 'partisans' were found from among those civilians remaining in an area in which partisans had been operating; such individuals paid a heavy price for the activities of the genuine partisans. Poorly organized anti-partisan operations also did not necessarily lead to significant partisan losses or even disruption where there was not the necessary co-operation between different elements. As German commanders were soon well aware, anti-partisan operations were only successful in destroying significant numbers of actual partisans where escape routes could be closed and partisan units surrounded. This required not only strong and effective co-ordination, but also extra manpower, sometimes including units temporarily pulled away from the front line.

German forces could also employ more indirect ways to whittle down partisan strength, or at least prevent partisan units increasing in strength or maintaining their existing strength. From the use of informants to the employment of 'false' partisan units intended to draw out partisan sympathizers, German forces and local collaborators sought to cut off the partisans from the local population and potential new recruits. During and after anti-partisan operations, German forces were more likely to take more draconian measures to isolate the partisans, from rounding up young people in a partisan-'infested' area for labour service in the Reich – in part to prevent them joining the partisans – to burning down villages and resettling varying numbers of the survivors. German measures to suppress the partisan movement were all too often brutally ruthless and focused on the civilian population, which, particularly earlier in the war, when zero tolerance was typical on both sides, also faced the wrath of the partisans should the local inhabitants try to placate their German overlords.

Kholm

18 January 1942

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

At the end of 1941, Germany's hopes of crushing the Soviet Union by year's end in a rapid campaign were finally dashed. First in the south at Rostov, then below Moscow and Tikhvin, German forces were halted and then pushed back before the year was over. As Heeresgruppe Mitte (Army Group Centre) near Moscow struggled to hold on to hard-won gains close to the Soviet capital in the face of the first of many major Soviet offensive operations during the winter of 1941/42, in January 1942 further large-scale Soviet offensive operations took place across most of Germany's Eastern Front. All too often, Soviet commanders had little difficulty finding gaping holes in the German lines and exploiting them. Limiting the extent to which they could push deeper and deeper into the German rear was often the thorny issue of resupply, with Hitler and his commanders well aware of the value of holding on to key towns and other objectives that lay on all-important roads, railway lines and key river crossings.

It was not only near Moscow, but also below Leningrad in north-west Russia that Soviet forces struck deep into German lines during January 1942. On 9 January, the 3rd Shock Army struck at the juncture between Heeresgruppe Mitte and Heeresgruppe Nord at the start of the Toropets–Kholm Offensive Operation. Initially, Soviet forces were relatively unsuccessful in exploiting weaknesses in the German defence on this sector. Soviet forces which included the 33rd Rifle Division hammered away at defensive positions manned by 123. Infanterie-Division for days before breaking through, despite the fact that the German division had to cover more than 100km of front. Once the Soviet forces had broken through, however, as elements of the 3rd Shock Army participated in the creation of

A tranquil scene on the river bank near Kholm taken in early 1942. The photograph gives some idea of the importance of Kholm's location on higher ground near the Lovat' River, and shows the sort of terrain that partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade traversed on their way to attack the town during the night of 17/18 January 1942. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-004-3634-11 Foto: Muck, Richard)

OPPOSITE
Generalmajor Theodor Scherer in Kholm sometime during the late winter of 1942. Born in 1889, Scherer fought in the Deutsches Heer (German Army) during World War I. Between the wars he served as a police officer, until he re-joined what was by now the Heer (Army) in 1935. A regimental commander during the campaign in the West, after the start of Operation *Barbarossa* he took over command of 281. Sicherungs-Division. At the time of the partisan attack on Kholm he had yet to arrive in the town, but was nevertheless in command of the security division that had responsibility for securing the local rear areas and lines of communication against partisan attack. After leading the defence of the Kholm pocket during early 1942 Scherer would move on to command 34. and 83. Infanterie-Divisionen and fulfil other command and staff roles. For his leadership in the organization of the defence of the Cholm Pocket he was awarded the Knight's Cross (February 1942) and Oak Leaves (May 1942). He was killed in a road traffic accident on 17 May 1951. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-004-3633-39A Foto: Muck, Richard)

the Demiansk 'pocket', the 33rd Rifle Division would push on towards the communications centre of Kholm on the Lovat' River.

Behind the front line, still deep in the German rear, Battalion Commissar Nikolai Grigorevich Vasil'ev's 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade was growing in strength. Although German forces had been able to keep the partisans more or less at bay – and even destroy a number of detachments – during the autumn of 1941, as the end of the year approached German security forces did not have the strength to penetrate less accessible regions from which partisan units were still operating. Having brought a number of detachments together under its control, by the beginning of January 1942 the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade had reached a strength of approximately 1,000 personnel. The recent growth of the formation was, according to its own reports, thanks in part to the addition of Red Army personnel who had escaped from German PoW camps or encirclement, but to a large extent to the mobilization of young people from the growing area the brigade controlled. From within their so-called 'Leningrad Partisan Zone', the brigade's command later claimed that it hoped to be able to create a force that would be able to defend an objective, engage in battle with a large German expeditionary force or attack a significant German garrison (Samukhin et al. 1981: 147). An opportunity would be provided in the form of the Kholm garrison.

In mid-January 1942, Aleksei Nikitich Asmolov – a key figure in the development of the partisan movement in the Leningrad Region and a member of the Military Soviet of the Red Army's North-Western Front – met General-Lieutenant Nikolai Fedorovich Vatutin, at this time chief-of-staff for the North-Western Front. Asmolov expected forces including the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade to be ordered to assist the Red Army in its advance. According to Asmolov, when asked where the partisans might best assist the Red Army, he asked when the Red Army might take Kholm – in doing so suggesting that the partisans might play a part in the capture of the town from their base area, 70km to the north-west. After Vatutin

suggested that the Red Army could take Kholm on 20 January, the night of 19/20 January was provisionally set for the attack and a radiogram was written to send to Asmolov's fellow partisan leaders. Four tonnes of weapons and munitions would be flown in to the partisans for the attack.

According to Asmolov, however, before the radiogram was sent, Vatutin wrote '17–18 January' instead of '19–20 January' (Asmolov 1983: 40). Vatutin's apparent overconfidence in the capabilities of Soviet forces to push rapidly past German defences was not unusual during the heady days of January 1942, when the Red Army was making such impressive progress overall against a Wehrmacht that was very much on the back foot. In the end, the 33rd Rifle Division was supposed to push into Kholm first to relieve the partisans, but in fact it did not start its effort to reach the town until the partisans had long since abandoned it. Elements of the 33rd Rifle Division finally reached Kholm on 20 January, struggling to make headway where the absence of roads and exceptionally deep snow had made it difficult for troops to reach their jumping-off positions for the assault on Kholm, and hampered adequate resupply (TsAMO f.1110.o.1.d.22.l.2).

As Soviet commanders made plans for the capture of Kholm through co-ordinated action by partisans and the Red Army, for German commanders the significance of this town – which had been deep in the German rear, but was now clearly under threat – increased dramatically. Events further north at Staraia Russa had initially absorbed much of the attention of German forces in the region, but by mid-January forces were being allocated to Kholm as well. As the bulk of 123. Infanterie-Division was pushed back to the north-west of the town, its Infanterie-Regiment 416 fought to the east of Kholm. Oberst Christoph Stengel, commander of Infanterie-Regiment 416, was given command of all units in the vicinity, including those in Kholm – initially just the older reservists of 1./LdSchtzBtl 869, and the men of Ortskommandantur 865 of 281. Sicherungs-Division, a handful of personnel responsible for local administration and security and technically subordinate to the command for 16. Armee's rear area. On 16 January they were joined by troops of 3./ResPolBtl 53; the members of this unit were perhaps somewhat jittery and only too aware of the dangers lurking outside Kholm, as on their way to the town from Loknia only a few days before they had been attacked by partisans not far from Kholm. In the ensuing firefight the company commander, Hauptmann Obser, had been killed along with four others, with six more from the company wounded (US NA T-315-1871-001152).

That evening, the bulk of three motorized companies of Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 65 also arrived in Kholm, although these troops were soon moved on to the fighting to the east before the partisan attack. A smaller unit of troops also arrived in Kholm that day by sleigh – the 15-strong advanced detachment of elements of III. Zug, 1. Kompanie of Bataillon der Waffen-SS zbV (*zur besonderen Verwendung*: for special employment), a Waffen-SS detachment that had previously been attached to Einsatzgruppe A. With this group was Oskars Perro, one of a significant number of Latvians attached to the battalion in November 1941 and who had been ordered to Kholm for anti-partisan duties on New Year's Day. Finally, on the evening of 17 January a further platoon of the motorized Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 65 belatedly

Partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade making their way through a forest and deep snow. Although this picture shows partisans on their way to take provisions to encircled Leningrad in March 1942, it gives some idea of the terrain and conditions that the detachments of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade had to navigate on their way to attack Kholm back in January of that year. (TASS via Getty Images)

arrived in Kholm. According to Oberleutnant der Schutzpolizei Kurt Krull, the battalion adjutant, Kholm was once again quiet after the arrivals of the previous day, as many of those troops who had just arrived slept (Mark 2011: 5). The stragglers from the battalion would still be in Kholm when the partisan attack began.

Partisan intelligence apparently suggested that the German garrison for the town was 1,300 strong at this time. Although this may not have been far from the mark in terms of the total number of German personnel in the town, the reality was that, as the partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade made their approach by sleigh, in terms of infantry combat units the garrison consisted of only a company of older reservists, a platoon of policemen, little more than a squad of Waffen-SS troops and the *Ortskommandantur* personnel. It seems probable that there were also some personnel from Infanterie-Regiment 416 in Kholm. The many support personnel in the town could and would also be called upon to fight, however, and German forces from the surrounding area could in principle be pulled into any fighting in the town if they were not otherwise engaged.

Early on 15 January, eight partisan detachments – more than 1,000 partisans – set off from their base areas to the north-west of Kholm for their long approach by sleigh, moving in three separate columns and having to cover 75–80km. If they were not discovered en route then they could expect a significant battle for the town. Not all of the partisans would attack the town; some had been detailed to take up blocking positions on the approaches to prevent reinforcement from the German rear. In conditions of deep frost, they made their way through deep snow and across ravines and frozen rivers towards their objective (Asmolov 1983: 41).

The 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade attack on Kholm, 18 January 1942

MAP KEY

1 15 January: Eight partisan detachments of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade – more than 1,000 partisans – set off through the deep snow from base areas in the Lake Polisto region towards Kholm, approaching the town by three different routes.

2 16–17 January: 15 men of III. Zug, 1. Kompanie of Bataillon der Waffen-SS zbV and a platoon and staff elements of motorized infantry of Reserve-Police-Bataillon 65 – the forces that will face the partisan attack – arrive in Kholm. They join the personnel of 1./LdSchtzBtl 869 already in the town.

3 0410hrs, 18 January: Partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade, some of whom have already penetrated Kholm, begin their all-out attack on the garrison, possibly after one of the detachments had run into a German patrol. On the approaches to the town from the north, south, east and west, smaller partisan forces have taken up blocking positions to prevent the garrison being reinforced from the German rear.

4 0600hrs, 18 January: German claims that Kholm had been cleared of partisans by this time probably refer to the centre of the town being back in German hands after the *Ortskommandantur* had been sacked by the partisans.

5 Morning of 18 January: German troops, probably of I./IR 386 and Jagdkommando 8 on their way to Kholm, engage with partisans in the village of Sopki on the western approaches to the town.

6 1100hrs, 18 January: According to partisan sources, at this time at least half of Kholm is still in the hands of the partisans.

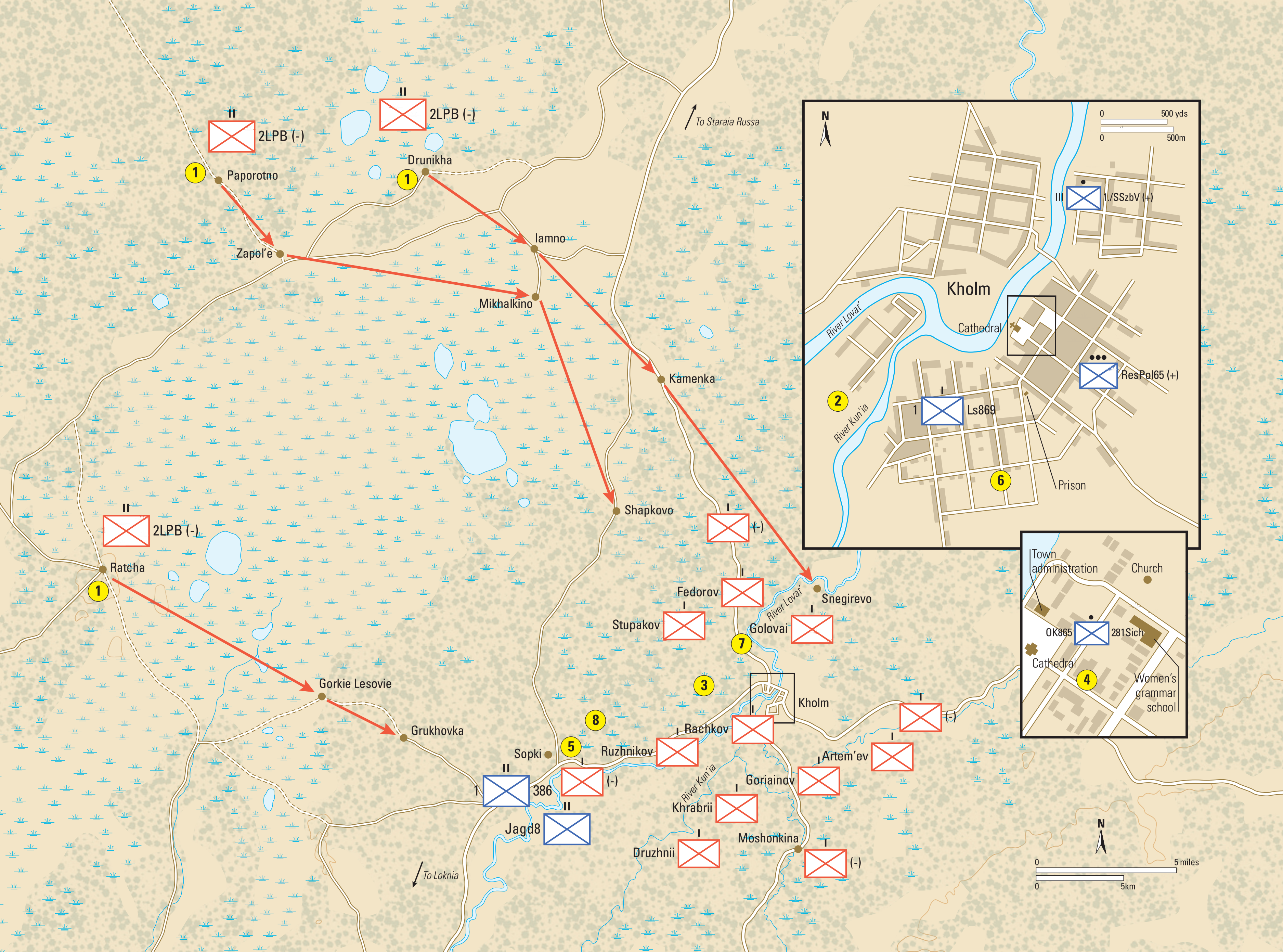
7 1200hrs, 18 January: With German forces in Kholm reinforced from outside, the partisans fighting within the town withdraw back to their base areas to the north-west.

8 1400hrs, 18 January: Partisans finally abandon their blocking position in the village of Sopki to the west of Kholm, allowing Axis reinforcements through to the town from the direction of Loknia.

Battlefield environment

The town of Kholm was situated in terrain typical of much of north-western Russia. Dense forest, lakes and marshland made the area difficult to traverse, although winter did at least make the latter less of a problem. The mobility advantages gained from frozen rivers, lakes and marches by both sides were arguably lost owing to the fact that the region was by this point blanketed in deep snow. The cold was also a problem for both sides, of course, with Heeresgruppe Nord reporting the temperatures in the area to be -15°C or below at the time. Even without the snow, the countryside included relatively inaccessible areas from which Soviet partisans could operate with relative impunity, where a major German effort would be required to dislodge them from bases deep in the forest and marshland.

Kholm was not only a key road junction; it also sat on higher ground near a crossing over the Lovat' River that would be of considerable significance once the spring thaw came. The town also had a German-built airfield, and had become a locally significant German supply base. In 1939, Kholm had a population of just over 6,000. Founded as a town in 1777, Kholm itself was in many ways a typical small town deep in the Russian countryside. For a considerable period before the October Revolution of 1917 it was a *uezd* (county) capital, and became a district centre under Soviet rule. Having enjoyed varying degrees of significance as a local administrative centre, Kholm could boast many historic buildings including the former Cathedral of the Epiphany, located in the centre of the town and appearing – heavily damaged – in many wartime photographs. Much of Kholm's architectural heritage would soon be destroyed, however, in a prolonged struggle for the town that would begin with an attack by the partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade.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Stupakov
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Kholm
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Cathedral
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River Kun'ia
1./SSzbV (+)
ResPol65 (+)
Ls869
Prison
0
500 yds
0
500m
Town administration
Church
OK865
281Sich
Cathedral
Women's grammar school

INTO COMBAT

Partisan and German accounts of the fighting agree that the partisan attack on the town itself began early in the morning of 18 January 1942. According to a report of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade, the attack began at 0410hrs. Although the official report from the Leningrad Partisan Headquarters to the Soviet High Command suggested that it began with a signal from the partisan command to attack, this may have been prompted by the fact that partisans were spotted on the approaches to the town by a German patrol and came under fire. At this point, flares might very well have been used to signal to all the partisans units to attack (Sheverdalkin). At the time the alarm had clearly been raised in the town and the flares had been released, the vanguard of the 'Druzhnii' detachment, including its commander Vasilii Zinov'ev, was – according to its former 'chief of staff' Shmatov – creeping forward near the *Ortskommandantur* in the centre of Kholm, having managed to penetrate that far without being noticed. Subsequently, however, the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade reported that the first group of partisans to attack was the group of comrade Golovai, attacking from the north (Samukhin et al. 1981: 149). Co-ordinating the different partisan detachments and keeping track of their progress must have been extremely difficult; even if the partisans possessed suitable radio communications, their use would have been ill-advised if the attackers wished to maintain the advantage of surprise.

By this time there was already fighting outside Kholm, where partisans had been posted on the approaches to the town in the villages of Novechka (on the Staraia Russa road), Sopki (to the west on the Loknia road), another Sopki (to the east on the Ostashkov road), and in the village of Kniazev (on the Toropets road). As early as 0200hrs, the blocking force in Sopki to the west was engaged with a German motorized column on its way to Kholm (Vinogradov 1969). We will return later to this engagement, which – according to partisan sources – continued into the early afternoon.

Back in Kholm itself, early that morning and with at least a significant element of surprise, partisans in addition to Zinov'ev's vanguard detachment were able to push into the centre of the town. There was certainly heavy fighting as the partisans pushed into the town, where at times the fighting against German troops apparently falling back to the centre of the town devolved into hand-to-hand combat. Partisan sources acknowledge that Axis forces, in keeping with German doctrine, were swift to counter-attack and to some extent seem to have been able to deflect elements from the partisan 'shock groups' heading for the centre of the town from their goal. German submachine gunners firing from 'attics' hit the partisan spearheads from the flanks, and had to be dealt with by fighters detached from the main partisan force. Nevertheless, elements pushed on into the centre of the town and after a bitter struggle were able to occupy the *Ortskommandantur* (Vinogradov 1969). The prison would not fall to the partisans, however, with the attackers being pinned along the high walls of its courtyard about 15m from the prison building itself. Soviet attempts to storm the prison with small arms and grenades failed, and German troops in what might have been the 'Church of the East' – also in the centre of the town – similarly held out.

Ivan Vasil'evich Vinogradov

Born on 29 August 1918 into a peasant family in the village of Shemiakino in Porkhov District, Leningrad Region, during the late 1930s Ivan Vinogradov was establishing himself as a poet and working as a journalist on the small local district newspaper. After the arrival of German forces on 7 July 1941, he joined a small partisan detachment, and went on to serve in the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade. Vinogradov took part in the fighting around Sopki to the west of the town during the Kholm operation, as well as participating in the subsequent attack on Iasski. At this time he was a *boets* – a partisan fighter, or the equivalent of a private. His niche was perhaps as a journalist, and as editor he was the driving force in producing the partisan newspaper for the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone' from which the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade struck Kholm. Countering German propaganda was an important part of the Soviet effort to win over the civilian population to the side of the partisans.

Vinogradov survived the war, subsequently writing a number of books about the partisan war in the Pskov area while working as a journalist, Communist Party functionary and editor, and continuing to write poetry. He became a Distinguished Cultural Worker of the Soviet Union in 1967, and died in Pskov, Russia, on 2 May 1995. A memorial plaque was placed on the house in which he had lived and from which he had edited the newspaper *Za Rodinu* (*For the Soviet Motherland*) for the Leningrad Headquarters of the Partisan Movement from 1943.

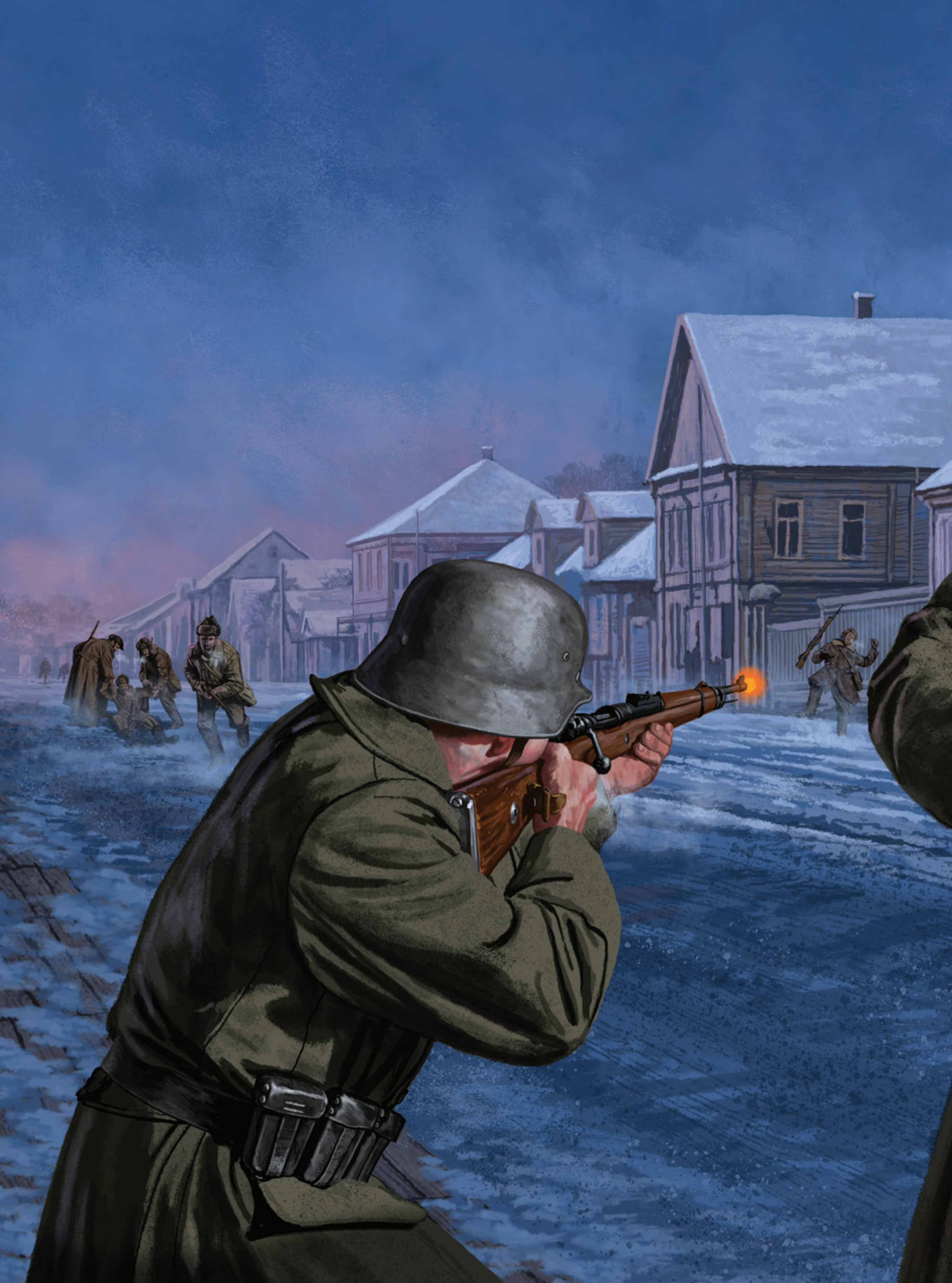
Latvian Waffen-SS soldier Oskars Perro and his comrades were asleep in straw in a school building of some sort in the town when, as dawn approached, they were woken by a rifle shot and shouting; seizing their rifles, they took up their posts at the school windows. Perro could hear automatic weapons and grenade blasts, muffled by the deep snow (Perro 1992: 93).

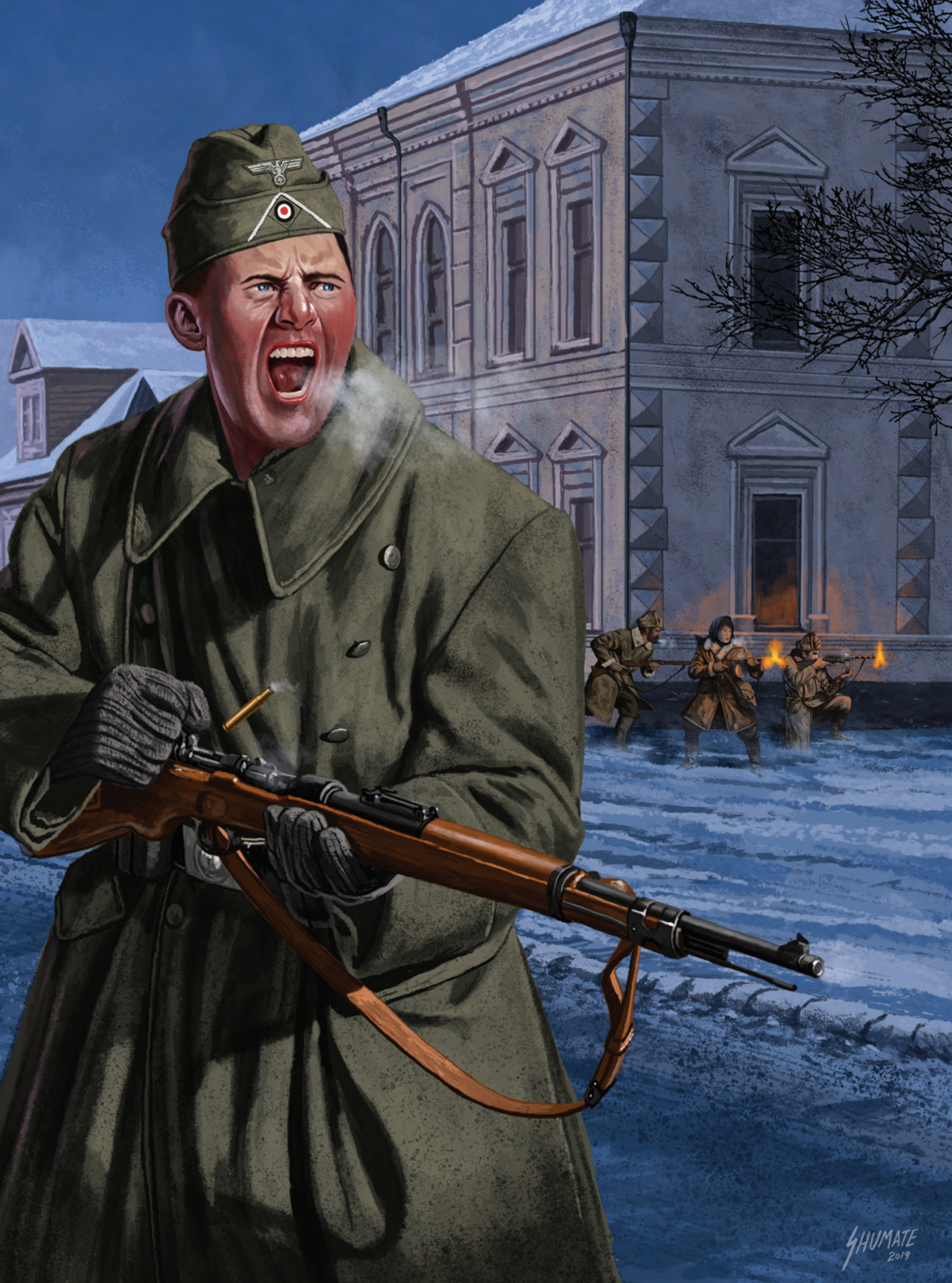
Perro and his comrades did not engage the partisans, and he continues his account of that night with a brief description of the cold and boredom typical of much of a front-line soldier's life in winter, noting that the noise of the fighting did not get closer; by the time the attack ended, the sun was up and had burned through the mist (Perro 1992: 93). Perro and his compatriots were able to go into the centre of Kholm after the partisan attack, where they discovered that the town had been attacked by a substantial number of well-armed partisans (Perro 1992: 94). He goes on to describe the scene

Oskars Perro

Oskars Perro was born on 26 September 1918 in Mazsalaca, Latvia. Prior to the war, Perro apparently studied medicine at university. One assumes he was hostile to the Soviet occupation of Latvia that began in the summer of 1940, as after the arrival of the Germans the following year he volunteered for service with the German armed forces. In early November 1941 he left Riga for the Leningrad Region, being allocated to Bataillon der Waffen-SS zbV, with which unit he was sent to Kholm at the beginning of 1942 and tasked with anti-partisan duties. At this time, like his partisan contemporary Vinogradov, Perro was probably only a *Schütze* (rifleman or private). He was typically reticent about having served in the Waffen-SS, and particularly in a unit that had been attached to Einsatzgruppe A prior to his arrival.

Although Perro seems not to have actively participated in repulsing the partisan attack of 18 January, he would go on to fight with German forces in the defence of the Kholm pocket. Wounded multiple times during the war, he would serve in a number of staff, training and liaison roles with the Latvian Waffen-SS prior to ending the war as the commander of a company of Waffen-Grenadier-Regiment der SS 43 *Hinrich Schuldt*, being awarded the Iron Cross 1st Class on 12 April 1945. Evacuated to Germany at the very end of the war, he entered Allied captivity and ended up in Canada, where he was to write a number of books in Latvian about his wartime experiences, with *Fortress Cholm* (1982) translated into English (1992). He died on 2 May 2003 in Toronto, Canada, aged 84.

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PREVIOUS PAGES

The partisan attack on Kholm, 18 January 1942

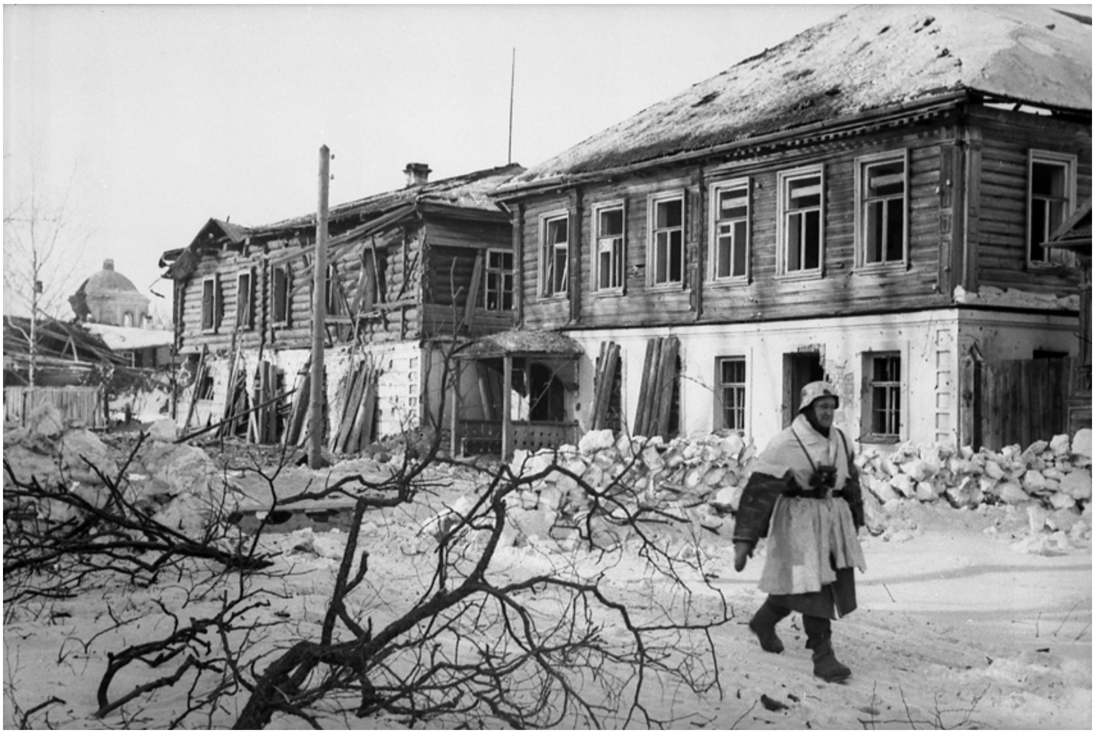
The fighting for the centre of Kholm was by all accounts intense after the partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade launched their attack at 0410hrs on 18 January 1942. Here, surviving personnel of the *Ortskommandantur* of the town, along with reservists of 1./LdSchtzBtl 869, try to fend off partisans near the women's gymnasium or grammar school building around dawn. Unlike the almost identically attired *Landesschützen* and *Ortskommandantur* personnel, two of whom here are doing their best with their Mauser Kar 98k rifles, the partisans are far from uniformly dressed and equipped. Wearing a mixture of civilian and military-issue clothing, the partisans are equipped with either captured or Soviet Mosin-Nagant M1891/30 rifles and the PPSh-41 submachine gun. One of the partisan attackers is a young woman, one of a sizeable minority of partisans serving in stark contrast to the total absence of female Wehrmacht personnel even in the German rear areas.

they encountered, noting how the partisan casualties wore white sheepskin coats, felt boots and fur-lined caps (Perro 1992: 94). These items of winter clothing were soon taken by the local population, apparently, but Perro noted at the time that acquiring such warm clothing in such a way might be a good idea. Not all the partisans were dressed as such, however; according to a 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade report, many partisans had not acquired suitable winter clothing and had struggled in the cold on their approach to the town (Samukhin et al. 1981: 149).

Although the German casualties had been removed by this point, Perro notes that they included the commandant for the *Ortskommandantur*, Hauptmann Thoma (Perro 1992: 94). Thoma was recorded as wounded by Heeresgruppe Nord, his adjutant, Rittmeister Georg Friedrich von Tempelhoff, having been killed.

Through – one assumes – talking to his fellow soldiers, Perro was able to build up some sort of picture of how the attack had developed. According to Perro, the main body of the partisans had approached the command post along the main road, riding in horse-drawn sleighs equipped with Maxim machine guns. Moving in parallel with the main body, individual partisans had made their way stealthily through gardens, while a third group, tasked with neutralizing the German sentries, had approached from another direction; Perro and his comrades encountered several sentries who had been knifed in the back (Perro 1992: 94–95).

Perro may have spoken to personnel from the elements of Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 65 in the town, whose participation in repulsing the partisan attack had been more active. Oberleutnant der Schutzpolizei Kurt Krull would later, as Hauptmann Krull, describe the actions of his platoon against the partisans that night. Similarly disturbed from their sleep as had been Perro and his compatriots, the policemen had made haste towards the sounds of gunfire in the centre of the town, where they knew that the *Ortskommandantur* was located. The squads of the platoon moved forward along the ditches along either side of the street and were soon under fire from the partisans (Mark 2011: 11). Led by a Leutnant Ortmann, the policemen sought to push the partisans from the centre of the town. According to Krull, Ortmann's contingent counter-attacked the partisan positions in the vicinity of the *Ortskommandantur*. Leading from the front, Ortmann was shot by a sniper



Kholm at some point during the winter of 1941/42 after the partisan attack, giving a good idea of the sort of environment through which the partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade fought their way in to the town centre. The tower of the Cathedral of the Epiphany in the centre of the town is in the background on the left. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-004-3636-31A Foto: Muck, Richard)

as he moved across the street; his orderly was also hit by sniper fire. Despite this, the policemen pressed their attack and forced the partisans back (Mark 2011: 11). Krull also notes that the enemy was probing western Kholm at the same time, where after the action in the centre of the town he apparently encountered support personnel who had fought alongside the policemen and men of the *Landesschützen-Kompanie* defending Kholm's western entrance (Mark 2011: 11).

Although Krull described Kholm itself as being free of partisans after fighting lasting an hour and a half, both Perro and partisan accounts suggest a more protracted struggle. The 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade reported that by 1100hrs, more than half of the town had been occupied by the partisans, and that only at midday, by which time German reinforcements had entered the town, was a Soviet retreat ordered (Samukhin et al. 1981: 149). At this point the partisans were also low on ammunition and at a significant disadvantage against the better-equipped German troops – and there was no sign of the 33rd Rifle Division that was supposed to be relieving them. After the main partisan force had pulled out of the town, both Perro and partisan sources suggest that a number stayed behind to harass German forces as snipers. After suffering some casualties, the German forces responded brutally, both against the snipers and the wider civilian population that could be accused of harbouring them. Five captured 'partisans' were hanged in the town square, Perro noting that one was a woman (Perro 1992: 97).

According to partisan sources, fighting outside the town – where partisan blocking detachments sought to prevent reinforcement of the garrison – continued past midday. At Sopki to the west of the town, during the night of 17/18 January a group from a force of 80 partisans had first blocked the Loknia–Kholm road about 1km outside the village, using small trees to which they added mines as further hindrance. Felling the trees and moving them into position was made more difficult by the fact that the Germans had cut down the trees near the road so that they would not provide cover for partisans. Those involved in blocking the road included Ivan Vasil'evich Vinogradov, future Soviet journalist and prominent literary figure, who subsequently wrote at length on the partisan war in the region. Having blocked the road, the partisans then sought to neutralize the small German garrison in the village, the aim having been for an advance group of partisans to enter the village covertly, forcing their way into the 'third house on the left' on the edge of the village – reportedly containing the garrison's command post – before opening fire (Vinogradov 1988: 92). Soviet hopes of quickly neutralizing the garrison were shattered, however, when the partisans were spotted before reaching their goal, having mistaken the third of three outlying houses as their target only to find out that they had some dead ground to cover before reaching the main part of the settlement. According to Vinogradov, the partisans then slowly advanced under fire into the village (Vinogradov 1988: 92).

Ultimately, according to Vinogradov, the partisans occupied about half of the village, and had to also engage troops he identifies as two battalions of Infanterie-Regiment 396 (218. Infanterie-Division) who were making their way through Sopki and on to Kholm by lorry from the Loknia direction. Vinogradov was probably referring to I./IR 386, a battalion of Infanterie-Regiment 386 having been dispatched to Kholm on 16 January for scheduled arrival on 18 January along with the anti-partisan unit Jagdkommando 8. At Sopki, although equipped largely with small arms, the partisans did have at least one captured light anti-tank gun, even if it was in far from ideal working order. Field improvisation was only partly able to make up for missing components, but the gun was a valuable asset for partisans all too often lacking that sort of firepower. When the gun's crew was knocked out, a young partisan named Lev Podorskii is given credit in a number of partisan accounts for manning the gun and keeping the advancing German forces under artillery fire. In his own account Podorskii modestly talks about the 'us' manning the gun, with which the partisans claimed to have knocked out two machine-gun positions and damaged or destroyed 16 vehicles (Akatov 1979: 103). According to partisan sources, only at 1400hrs on 18 January did the partisans abandon the village.

In the context of Red Army successes at the front during the first half of January 1942, the partisan attack on Kholm during the night of 17/18 January was a worrying development for German commanders in the region, and indeed for those higher up the chain of command. The attack was noted even in the war diary for the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW; German High Command of the Armed Forces), in which it was stated in the entry for 19 January for Heeresgruppe Nord that there was a partisan attack in strength against Kholm – a rare mention for partisans in the OKW war diary, and particularly so early in the war (Hillgruber 1982: 239). At the time the attack was reported to 281. Sicherungs-Division, the German-built airfield was still under the control of the partisans, and it was recorded in the

The main square of the town of Kholm during the winter of 1941/42, in the area of which there was bitter fighting between the partisans and the Kholm garrison. This picture was also taken considerably later than the partisan attack, at the time of which the town had not been devastated by Soviet artillery fire. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-004-3637-30A Foto: Muck, Richard)

division's war diary entry for 18 January 1942 how 'from 04:00 hours there was a sustained attack by a large partisan band on Cholm. The partisans made it up to the *Ortskommandantur* but were repulsed in a counterattack led by the strongpoint commander, Major Stocki, with the partisans taking heavy losses' (US NA T-315-1871-001147).

The shock caused by the partisan attack on Kholm was perhaps more about the prospect of partisans co-operating with the Red Army and striking from behind German lines to seize such a key objective than the losses suffered by German forces. On 18 January, 281. Sicherungs-Division recorded the loss of three officers along with a number of NCOs and other ranks killed or wounded. Soon after the partisan attack, Heeresgruppe Nord noted that Hauptmann Thoma, commanding the *Ortskommandantur*, had been wounded in the attack, and his adjutant killed. As the author and military historian Jason D. Mark notes, Oberleutnant Friedrich Bergner of Infanterie-Regiment 416 and Leutnant der Schutzpolizei Helmut Ortmann of 3./ResPolBtl 65 were also killed in Kholm at the time, along with at least two more policemen and two Wehrmacht personnel – the latter possibly including Stabsfeldwebel Conrad Berg, a '*Spiess*' ('sarge') mentioned by Perro in his account of that evening (Mark 2011: 12). This tally does not seem to take account of the sentries reported by both Perro and Krull as having been killed.

Partisan casualties were probably higher than for the German forces defending Kholm. Officially, 52 partisans were reported as having been killed or wounded in the fighting for the town. These included a significant number of detachment commanders and other leadership elements, the most famous of whom was probably the commander of the 'Druzhnii' detachment, Vasilii Zinov'ev, killed during the fighting around the *Ortskommandantur* and the prison in the centre of the town. As with their German equivalents, partisan detachment commanders who led detachments that were up to company size typically led from the front, and suffered accordingly.

Iasski

5 February 1942

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Although the attack on Kholm had seen some tactical success for the Soviets – the partisans had, after all, penetrated into the centre of the town and occupied a significant proportion of it, albeit for a matter of hours – it was an operational failure. Without the promised relief by the Red Army, the attack was merely a large-scale raid that in the end contributed little to operations at the front beyond delaying the arrival of some German troops at the front line. Had the Red Army launched offensive operations to co-ordinate with the partisans, then the sacrifices of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade might have contributed to the capture of the town by Soviet forces. Ultimately, Kholm was not liberated by the Red Army until February 1944.

Although an operational failure, the Kholm attack had shown that increasingly large partisan formations could take on significant German garrisons with some success. Partisan losses had been fairly heavy, particularly in the sense of losing experienced personnel. Nevertheless, thanks in part to energetic recruitment of young people from the area under their influence or control, escaped PoWs and some key personnel flown or parachuted in, the partisans were able to maintain their numerical strength and operational capabilities, even if it would take time to provide training to new recruits. German forces were aware of the fact that the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade was recruiting from areas nominally under German occupation, but dealing with the brigade would require considerable resources, and throwing everything against one partisan formation would leave other areas vulnerable.

After a period of rest back in the forest camps, a number of detachments of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade would receive new assignments.

Troops of a Latvian *Jagdkommando* or 'hunting group' engaged in anti-partisan operations on 19 March 1943, probably to the south of Heeresgruppe Nord's administrative area on Belorussian territory. On the territory occupied by Heeresgruppe Nord, and in Belorussia, considerable use was made of such troops drawn from the Baltic republics, that had only recently been incorporated into the Soviet Union and in which anti-Soviet sentiment was relatively strong. (Bundesarchiv Bild 183-B23740 Foto: Piepen, Hans van der)

Partisan reconnaissance indicated that the village of Iasski to the east of Dedovichi was garrisoned by '20th Latvian SS Battalion' (Samukhin et al. 1981: 154), and was vulnerable to partisan attack. This force of 250–270 men was characterized as being engaged in the 'robbery' of the local population, particularly along the River Shelon' (Samukhin et al. 1981: 154). Attacking such garrisons meant not only sapping the strength of German forces, but also hampering their ability to exploit occupied territory in the interests of the Axis war effort.

German security forces were only too well aware of the threat posed by the partisans to the east of the key Dno–Novosokolniki railway line. With a significant proportion of German security forces engaged at the front, Latvian and Estonian troops had been brought in to assist in securing the area. In late January 1942, German security forces were given little respite by the partisans. German reports highlight, for example, an attack by partisans on the railway station at Wydomka (Vidumka), 8km west of Novosokolniki, during the night of 30/31 January that was beaten back with the assistance of an armoured train.

During the night of 3/4 January, a battalion-strength force from the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade moved into position to strike at Iasski. As was often the case, the partisans knew the area well, with the commander of one of the detachments involved, Nikolai Rachkov of the 'Budenovets' detachment, having been a Communist Party 'secretary' or local leader for the Dedovichi District in which Iasski was located. Contrary to partisan accounts, however, the village was not garrisoned by '20th Latvian SS Battalion', but only 4./LettPolBtl 18, which was operating against partisans

Troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 surround a village during the winter of 1942/43. Where possible, and particularly during the winter, partisans would seek shelter from the elements in villages and other settlements. Their presence in a particular village would often become known to German forces as a result of an informant, leading to the sort of operation shown here and as planned by 4./LettPolBtl 18 when its personnel engaged partisans in the early morning of 4 February 1942 on the eve of the partisan attack on Iasski on 5 February. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

from Iasski. As partisan forces moved into position, they were in fact to be engaged by these troops.

For 4 February, 281. Sicherungs-Division's war diary noted that the policemen of 4./LettPolBtl 18 had 'engaged in combat with a strong partisan band near Iasski' (US NA T-315-1871-001129). There were in fact two separate engagements involving the Latvian policemen that day as two reinforced platoons moved into position to attack partisans identified as operating to the south-east of Iasski in the Kruglova–Dubovka area. The second of the two Latvian groups engaged in brief but intense combat with the 'Goriainov' partisan detachment at Parli, 5km south-east of Iasski. There, according to a former commander of the detachment after Goriainov's death at Kholm, Grigorii Timofeevich Volostnov, the unit was to spend the night of 3/4 February having just trekked 35km from their base area. The partisans were accompanied by 60 horses, meaning that their arrival was undoubtedly far from covert. Arriving in Parli at 2300hrs, the partisans posted sentries and most of their comrades lay down to get some sleep. Volostnov only lay down to sleep at 0100hrs in the 'hut' chosen for the command post – he was fully dressed, as was the norm for the partisans in such circumstances – when the hut was hit by enemy fire and grenades began to explode (Afanas'ev). On their way to getting into position to attack partisans reported further east, the Latvians had apparently stumbled upon Volostnov's force. Although the Latvian attack had caught the partisans by surprise – and they were pressing on the command post – the whole of the partisan command group managed to escape out of the back door into the yard (Afanas'ev). With one partisan platoon surrounded by the enemy, Volostnov describes how the partisan submachine-gun detachment and others counter-attacked and managed to clear the village of the enemy in a ten-minute firefight that at times devolved into hand-to-hand combat. The partisans had taken casualties – how many is unclear – but more significant for their mission was the fact that they had used up much of their ammunition and the enemy in the area was alerted to a partisan presence. German reports highlight

What is probably a partisan reconnaissance detachment, armed with PPSh-41 submachine guns, being directed by a local woman somewhere in German-occupied territory in late 1942. The significant number of submachine guns provided to partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade for the attack on Iasski apparently gave them a considerable advantage in terms of firepower at shorter ranges over the largely rifle-equipped Latvians. (Sputnik 215)

how the reinforced platoon of Latvian troops was indeed repelled by the partisans, and had lost one killed and two wounded. Nevertheless, the partisan commander was in trouble – having met the brigade commander Vasil'ev, and commissar Orlov, Volostnov was duly chided for potentially compromising the Iasski operation, but the attack was to go ahead as planned (Afanas'ev).

The 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade subsequently noted that the engagement at Parli was just one of a number of instances where partisans encountered relatively small groups of Latvians that day (Samukhin et al. 1981: 154). German documents also indicate Latvian troops were engaged near Pleschtschewka (Pleshchevka) to the east of Iasski that day, at which location a reinforced platoon also seems to have been repelled by the partisans, although in this instance without loss to the Latvians. Both Latvian platoons were back in Iasski later in the morning of 4 February. Fearful that partisan activity in the area might mean an attack on Iasski itself, that afternoon the battalion commander of Landesschützen-Bataillon 960 in nearby Dedovichi sent Leutnant Kehrein with 20 men and three World War I-vintage 'LMGs' to reinforce Iasski (US NA T-315-1875-000566). Reinforcements including an armoured train, Panzerzug 26, were also sent to Dedovichi from Porkhov. The village of Iasski remained vulnerable, however, and was certainly more exposed than the partisans knew when they struck in the early morning of 5 February 1942. Expecting to encounter a battalion, they would face only a reinforced company.

The 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade attack on Iasski, 5 February 1942

MAP KEY

1 2300hrs, 3 February: During the night of 3/4 February, partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade move into the Iasski area in preparation for their planned attack on the settlement during the small hours of 5 February. Partisans of the 'Goriainov' detachment arrive in the village of Parli, about 5km to the south-east of Iasski, at about 2300hrs on 3 February. With sentries posted, most of the partisans settle down to sleep for the night.

2 *c*.0100hrs, 4 February: Partisans of the 'Goriainov' detachment in Parli are awakened by gunfire as a reinforced platoon from 4./LettPolBtl 18 attacks the village, having stumbled across the partisans there en route to engage partisans reported in the Kruglova–Dubovka area further east The stronger partisan force gains the upper hand and holds the village, but uses up much of its ammunition intended for the attack on Iasski. A similar engagement with a reinforced company of Latvian police apparently takes place in Pleshchevka to the north-east. The Latvians return to their base at Iasski.

3 Afternoon, 4 February: Fearful that the presence of partisan forces in the area might mean an attack on Iasski, the commander of Landesschützen-Bataillon 960 in nearby Dedovichi sends Leutnant Kehrein with 20 men and three aged machine guns of 1./LdSchtzBtl 960 to reinforce the Latvian company in Iasski.

4 0400hrs, 5 February: With a red flare to signal the start of the attack, partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade attack the village of Iasski from three directions, the partisans of the 'Khrabrii' detachment soon breaking into the village from the south-east.

5 After 0400hrs, 5 February: Latvian troops concentrated on a school building in the east of the village abandon their positions and seek to break through to Dedovichi. They reach Dedovichi later that morning, despite partisans of the 'Za Rodinu' detachment in blocking positions to the west of Iasski.

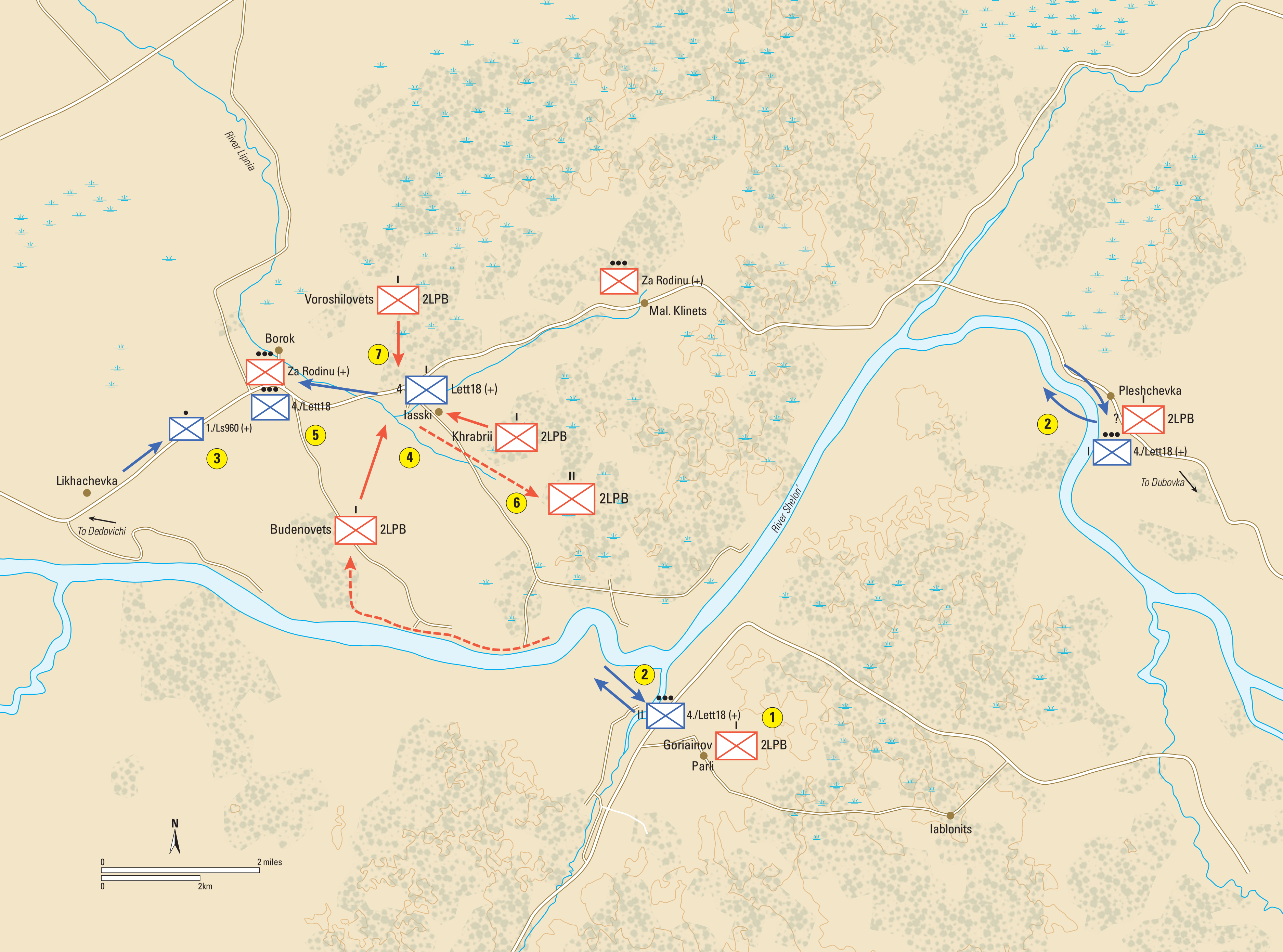
6 0900–0930hrs, 5 February: With a German reconnaissance aircraft having appeared over the village, according to German/Latvian accounts, at about 0930hrs the partisans cease their attack on the beleaguered defenders remaining in the western portion of the village and pull out in a south-easterly direction.

7 Evening, 5 February: Fearing further partisan attacks, the remaining defenders in Iasski pull back to Dedovichi before nightfall, leaving the village to the partisans.

Battlefield environment

The village of Iasski lay about 10km to the east of the town of Dedovichi on the Dno–Novosokolniki railway line. The town itself had little of operational or strategic significance within it, but was one of the larger settlements in a relatively densely populated area. If Dedovichi's pre-war population was in the low thousands, Iasski's was in the hundreds. Located on the Lipnia River, and not far from the larger Shelon' River to the south, its location and relative size in a sea of tiny settlements meant that it was one of the population centres from which German security forces – in this case Latvians – were operating. Although Iasski was a suitable location from which German forces could try to control the settlements along the rivers and play a role in keeping the partisans away from the key railway line to the west, its proximity to the vast Serbolovskii Forest that threatened to engulf it, particularly from the north and east, made it vulnerable to partisan attack.

Although at times the deep snow in the region made it easier to track the partisans, it hampered mobility for all concerned. The snow also muffled sound and often blocked line-of-sight, giving the partisans a greater chance of making their approach without the alarm being raised. Also assisting the partisans that night was the weather; during the night of the attack on Iasski, Vinogradov describes seeing the shapes of buildings appear from amid freezing fog (Vinogradov 1988: 402).


Za Rodinu (+)
Mal. Klinets
Voroshilovets
2LPB
I
7
Borok
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4
Lett18 (+)
I
4./Lett18
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3
5
4
Iasski
Khrabrii
2LPB
I
II
2LPB
6
Likhachevka
To Dedovichi
Budenovets
2LPB
I
River Lipnia
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INTO COMBAT

During the night of 4/5 February, the partisans of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade moved into position for the attack on Iasski. With partisans from the ‘Za Rodinu’ detachment posted to cover the approaches to the village along the road to the east and west, and with the ‘Voroshilovets’ detachment to attack from the forest to the north, the remaining detachments would attack from the south and south-east. In one of his many works, Ivan Vinogradov – fighting with the ‘Budenovets’ detachment – recounts how his unit had approached their jumping-off point for the attack from the east, advancing along the frozen Shelon’ River. According to partisan sources, in the middle of the night and with a red flare as a signal, the attack began. In its lengthy report on the attack, 4./LettPolBtl 18 noted that at 0400hrs the partisans attacked from the north, south and east after ‘a short concentrated and sudden burst of fire [*Feuerüberfall*] on the village’ (US NA T-315-1875-000573). The Latvians – reinforced by the small German force from Dedovichi – were divided primarily between two schools, one on the western side of the village on the road out towards Dedovichi, the other towards the eastern side. Facing in three directions outside the village the company had earlier positioned three squads of *Spähtruppen* (scouts), but these troops had returned to the village before the partisan attack began.

According to Soviet accounts, partisans of the ‘Khrabrii’ detachment first broke into the village from the south-east and quickly occupied the eastern portion of the settlement. Here, the Latvians were forced to abandon their school building, which was apparently on fire thanks to the partisan use of incendiary ammunition, according to the Latvians. Also according to the Latvians, this group of defenders sought ‘to break out of encirclement in the direction of Dedovichi’ (US NA T-315-1875-000573). Partisans certainly reported a group of Latvians at one point breaking out of the partisan encirclement and heading for Dedovichi, only to be met by fire from partisans of the ‘Za Rodinu’ detachment in their blocking positions to the west. Former partisan commander Volostnov claimed that some of those fleeing the village were still in their underwear – a claim otherwise uncorroborated. Certainly, just after midday on 5 February one Leutnant Mahlinsch was reported by Landesschützen-Bataillon 960 as having arrived in Dedovichi with his platoon, having got past the partisan blocking force to the west of Iasski (US NA T-315-1875-000566).

According to Vinogradov, the attack by the ‘Budenovets’ detachment from the south, led by its commander Vasilii Ivanovich Efremov, started with some alacrity. As the attack began, Vinogradov observed how Efremov, armed with a pistol, moved forward shouting ‘Forward! For the Motherland!’ (Vinogradov 1988: 403). Although the ‘Budenovets’ detachment was to be pinned by two machine guns and forced to go to ground for some time, the fact that the partisans were pressing forward from multiple directions meant that this state of affairs would not last for long (Samukhin et al. 1981: 151). A protracted struggle for the village ensued. Partisans of the ‘Voroshilovets’ detachment coming from the north side of the village were soon able to occupy one of the schools – one assumes the one to the east, which had been abandoned. Into the second, according to the Latvians, wounded were brought in from

elsewhere in the village. Here, one Latvian and two German officers, and 15 men, apparently made a stand against the partisans attacking from all sides. Although the Latvians were able to repel at least one effort by the partisans to take the building, the defenders' position was believed to be hopeless; the east side of the school was soon destroyed by a series of explosions. The defence was hampered by a shortage of ammunition, and the fact that communication between Germans and Latvians was limited by language issues.

The contribution of the 21 reinforcements sent from Dedovichi to Iasski is far from clear. In his after-action report, Leutnant Kehrein tried to explain the success of the partisans and in particular the failure of his troops to make much of a difference. He suggested that the three 'light machine guns' – aged water-cooled MG 08/15s – they brought with them which were used to support the Latvians seem not to have functioned effectively in the cold, their fire being limited to 'short bursts' (US NA T-315-1875-000570). He went on to highlight how in the darkness picking out the partisans was a problem, that the heavy snow provided cover, and that by the time it was light the partisans already had the upper hand thanks in part to their preponderance of automatic weapons – while the Latvians were largely equipped with former Soviet rifles.

Nevertheless, the battle for Iasski was not a short one – according to the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade, the battle continued until 1100hrs on 5 February, when the village was occupied and the garrison wiped out (Samukhin et al. 1981: 151). This does not correspond with Axis accounts, however. According to the report for the Latvian company, at about 0900hrs a German reconnaissance aircraft appeared over the village before heading off to the north. At about 0930hrs, partisan fire suddenly ceased and the partisans pulled out in a south-easterly direction. Nevertheless, it would seem plausible that at least some partisans ended up returning to the village and controlling the entire settlement for a brief period. That day – out of communication with Dedovichi, having taken heavy casualties and facing the possibility of further partisan attacks – the surviving Latvian and German defenders pulled out to Dedovichi before nightfall. On 6 February, 281. Sicherungs-Division noted in its war diary that 'we do not occupy Iasski, which has been partially burnt down' (US NA T-315-1871-001127).

ABOVE LEFT
'Retribution against a partisan village' reads the caption that accompanied this photograph from Polizei-Regiment 9. The population east of Dedovichi and along the Shelon' River in the aftermath of the attacks on Iasski and Dedovichi would certainly have experienced such punishment during the spring of 1942 as retribution for partisan activity in the area. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

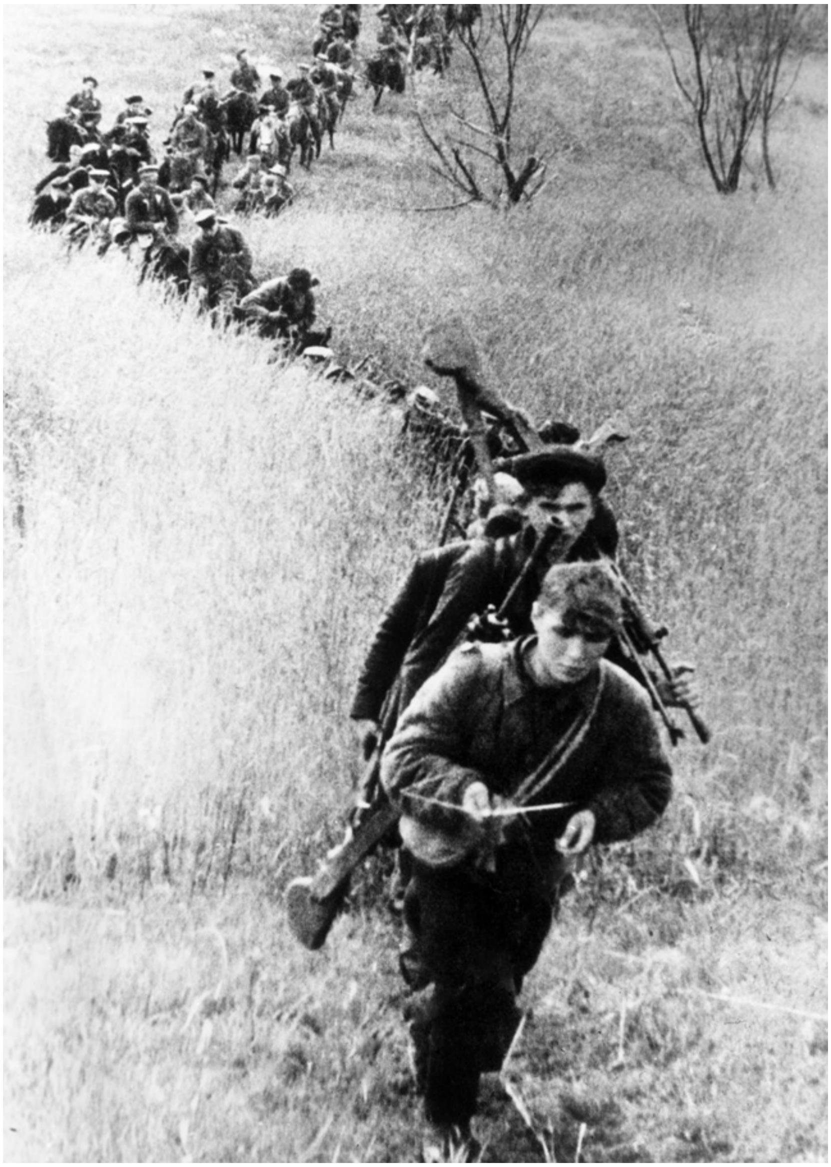
ABOVE RIGHT
Policemen of Polizei-Regiment 9 engage the enemy with a World War I-vintage MG 08 heavy machine gun. The poor performance of this weapon in the cold apparently limited the utility of a lightened variant of this weapon (the MG 08/15) during the defence of Iasski on 5 February 1942. When functioning correctly, however, such weapons gave German forces a sustained-fire capability often lacked by the partisans. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

Commander of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade, Nikolai Grigorevich Vasil'ev (left), being awarded the Order of Lenin on 7 February 1942 after his brigade's operations against Kholm and Iasski. Born in 1908, Vasil'ev was called up to the Red Army in 1929, serving at first in the ranks with the 46th Rifle Regiment of the 16th Rifle Division. Staying in the Red Army after his compulsory service, by 1936 he had completed the necessary courses to become a *politruk* or junior political officer. Immediately prior to the Great Patriotic War, he was head of the Red Army garrison club in Novgorod. After the outbreak of war, he volunteered to serve as a partisan and was sent into the German rear from Staraia Russa in late July 1941. As head of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade, he oversaw its growth from a strength of around 100 to roughly 1,200 by the time of the brigade's operation against Kholm in January 1942. Vasil'ev fell ill while in the enemy rear in late 1942, and eventually died of tuberculosis on the Soviet side of the front line on 25 March 1943. He was posthumously awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union on 2 April 1944. (MacLaren Sovfoto 953)

Partisan claims for German losses during the operation were clearly, as was all too often the case, absurd. The 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade would claim 165 enemy soldiers and officers killed, although they were able to round up only 28 rifles, two 'heavy' machine guns, some grenades and ammunition (Samukhin et al. 1981: 151). The partisan claim for German casualties was accurate in one sense: the defending force had been about 160 strong and not a battalion-strength force as originally thought. The Latvian company reported 19 Latvian police soldiers killed along with three German soldiers and one German *Polizeisekretär* (a rank for an administrator in the Ordnungspolizei equivalent to *Meister*, the highest enlisted rank) attached to the Latvian company, as well as ten seriously wounded. After the battle the remaining portion of the Latvian police company in Iasski could muster only one Latvian and two German officers plus 25 other ranks as combat-effective. Leutnant Kehrein reported that of his 21 personnel from Landesschützen-Bataillon 960, there were four 'privates' and one NCO killed, and two 'privates' wounded. German sources put partisan casualties at 60–70, although with the partisans taking many of their casualties with them when they pulled back – using horses and carts from the village – accurate figures for their casualties were difficult to assess. The partisans themselves reported having lost 13 killed and 40 wounded (Samukhin et al. 1981: 152).

The success of the attack against Iasski clearly shook local German forces, with far more written about the encounter in German reports than the magnitude of the engagement would otherwise have warranted because of the failure to secure the village. Subsequently, the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade was further emboldened in its operations, and before the end of February 1942 sought to destroy the more significant German garrison slightly further east at Dedovichi during the night of 21/22 February. This attack was clearly less successful than the partisans claimed; immediately after the attack 281. Sicherungs-Division put German casualties in the teens rather than the hundreds claimed by the partisans. The partisans highlighted the fact that a bridge west of the town over the Shelon' River had been destroyed, but according to 281. Sicherungs-Division 'traffic was however not disrupted' (US NA T501-8-000923-4).

Even if 281. Sicherungs-Division was playing down the damage caused by the partisan attack on Dedovichi, the fact that the district administrative centre of Dedovichi had been attacked by approaching 1,000 partisans was nevertheless concerning, and particularly so as it came on the back of the attacks on Kholm and Iasski. With German lines of communication under considerable threat, German forces could not afford to leave the base areas of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade untouched. Throughout the



Leningrad partisans on the move in the summer of 1942. Note the large number of personnel on horseback, being led by young partisans armed in at least two instances with DP Model 1927 light machine guns. (Sputnik 888564)

spring and summer of 1942, German forces applied increasing pressure to this so-called ‘Leningrad Partisan Zone’. Finally, in late August and early September, German forces were able to overwhelm the partisan zone. On 8 September 1942 it was reported in the OKW war diary under Heeresgruppe Nord that on the territory of the rear areas west of Kholm and in the lake district between Kholm and the Dno–Velikie–Luki railway the partisans were engaged and partially destroyed (Hillgruber 1982: 699). This meant the displacement of many of the partisan units in the region into neighbouring areas with heavy losses, rather than their destruction. Poorly armed partisan units were easy to displace once faced with superior force, but actually destroying partisan detachments so that they did not simply spring up again elsewhere shortly after a major anti-partisan operation was far more difficult.

Operation *Spring Clean*

18–22 April 1943

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

The third action examined in this book involves German attempts to destroy a number of partisan detachments to the west of the Dno–Novosokolniki railway line, including the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade, operating in the borderlands between Belorussia and north-west Russia. Although pushed from district to district by German operations, or redeployed against new targets, these partisan units continued to disrupt not only German lines of communication, but also economic exploitation of the region. Operation *Spring Clean* was one of a series of operations in a wider Axis effort during the winter of 1942/43 to destroy this and other significant partisan concentrations.

In late March 1943, the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade (Shipovalov) consisted of seven detachments and a machine-gun platoon, although three detachments were operating away from the main force in the Kudever'–Novorzhev area. Information from a variety of sources, including returns from partisan detachments to the Kalinin Headquarters of the Partisan Movement, suggests that the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade probably had a strength of about 421 partisans in the Kudever' area in mid-April 1942. Combining similar information for the strength of the 8th (Karlikov) and 13th (Babakov) Kalinin Partisan brigades, and the 'Liza Chaikina' (Maksimenko) Kalinin Partisan Brigade with that for the 2nd (Shipovalov) Kalinin Partisan Brigade, we can safely assume a strength of somewhere close to 2,000 partisans in the Kudever' area in late April 1943. Many of the partisans of the 'Liza Chaikina' (Maksimenko) Kalinin Partisan Brigade were in their late teens, including an unusually high proportion of young women for a partisan unit. Not enjoying the use of relatively secure base areas as in the case of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade at the time of the

Partisans celebrating the first anniversary of the start of the activities of their unit. It is possible that the partisans belong to the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade, and are celebrating the anniversary within the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone'. Note the large number of uniforms – certainly consistent with the uniformed core and reinforcements from Soviet lines provided to the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade during 1941 and into 1942. (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

Kholm and Iasski operations, the partisans in the Kudever' area were far more reliant on lighter equipment. The trusty Maxim Model 1910 heavy machine gun seems to have been available in a direct-fire role, however, along with man-portable mortars and anti-tank rifles.

Operating against the 2nd (Shipovalov), 8th (Karlikov) and 13th (Babakov) Kalinin Partisan brigades – and also (slightly later) the 'Liza Chaikina' (Maksimenko) Kalinin Partisan Brigade – was a significant German and allied force of troops under the overall command of 281. Sicherungs-Division. For the operation 281. Sicherungs-Division could deploy what was described as a total of 13 German and eight *landeseigene* (indigenous) 'battalions', divided into four *Kampfgruppen* or battlegroups. These battlegroups were led by and named after: Oberst Paul Gallas of 281. Sicherungs-Division (Gruppe Gallas); Generalleutnant Kurt Spemann of the 16. Armee rear area (Gruppe Spemann); Oberstleutnant Wortmann of 331. Infanterie-Division (Gruppe Wortmann); and Generalmajor Bruno Scultetus of Feldkommandantur 186

A largely female group of partisans in the Pskov region in late 1942. Significant numbers of young women were drawn into the partisan movement from the local population. (Sputnik 68660)

(Gruppe Scultetus) (US NA T-315-1872-000102-3). Each group was broken down into *Untergruppen* (sub-groups). The operation would be under the overall command of Generalmajor Wilhelm-Hunold von Stockhausen, commander of 281. Sicherungs-Division with, according to plans of 14 April, Alarmkompanie Fabricius, two platoons of *Beutepanzer* (captured tanks) and I./PolRgt 9 (previously I./ResPolRgt 9) at his disposal.

Much of the fighting against the partisans during the primary operation would be undertaken by Gruppe Gallas. Under the command of Oberst Gallas were: Untergruppe Woyzella, consisting of a battalion and additional companies of Radfahr-Regiment 3 (formerly Sicherungs-Regiment 3) and Ost-Reiter-Abteilung 281 (without 3./OstReiterAbt 281), led by Oberstleutnant Woyzella of Radfahr-Regiment 3; and also Untergruppe Hager, made up of a battalion with additional components of Sicherungs-Regiment 107; pioneers of Infanterie-Pionier-Zug 107; and anti-aircraft troops of FlaK-Zug Holländer, led by Hauptmann Hager of Sicherungs-Regiment 107. For special deployment, Gallas retained a platoon from Ost-Pionier-Bataillon 672 and an armoured car.

To the east of Gruppe Gallas, Gruppe Spemann – which would also engage with significant partisan strength during the primary operation – contained troops of the 16. Armee rear area with supporting elements. Some idea of the strength of the 'battalions' involved can be gained from returns for the strength of the 16. Armee rear area at the beginning of May 1943. For example, I./SichRgt 94, which participated as a whole in Operation *Spring Clean* as part of Gruppe Spemann, had a strength of 532 men as of 1 May – part of Untergruppe Findeisen – with Gruppe Spemann as a whole

‘Cossack’ troops in German service, here in the territory of Heeresgruppe Mitte (Army Group Centre) in May 1943. By this time the use of such ‘indigenous’ cavalry for rear-area security functions had increased significantly. Ost-Reiter-Abteilung 281 would play a meaningful role during Operation *Spring Clean* and its aftermath in April 1943. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-153-1989-28 Foto: Götze)

having a total strength of 2,641 (US NA T501-82-00254). Many battalions or equivalent formations were undoubtedly small – the whole of Ost-Reiter-Abteilung 281 with its ‘Cossack’ cavalry squadrons had in early 1943 a combat strength of only 339 comprising 53 Germans and 286 Ukrainians – and as is apparent for the units included in Gruppe Gallas, battalions were not necessarily deployed whole.

Troops deployed as part of the four *Kampfgruppen* included elements not only of 331. Infanterie-Division, but also 290. Infanterie-Division along with many *Osttruppen*. These *Osttruppen* units included company-strength *Kosakenschwadronen* (Cossack cavalry squadrons) and a reinforced company of Armenisches Infanterie-Bataillon I./198 (often identified as Armenisches Feld-Bataillon I./198). Untergruppe Nickel of Gruppe Spemann also included local Russian collaborators of EKA Beshanizy (*sic*) – perhaps the least capable or reliable ‘troops’ in the German order of battle.

The German force directly engaged in Operation *Spring Clean* probably had a strength in excess of 10,000 men. Partisan estimates of a force of 4,000–5,000 attacking them on the first day of the operation probably reflect their assessment of the strength of Gruppe Gallas alone. In crude quantitative terms, the partisans were certainly vastly outnumbered, and lacked even the fairly limited artillery, armoured and token air support afforded to German forces.

A 281. Sicherungs-Division order for 17 April noted that, on the eve of Operation *Spring Clean* on that date, German intelligence from *Vertrauensleute* (*V-Leute*: agents) and deserters made it clear that the partisans were concentrated in the area to the north of Kudever’ as opposed to in the east as initially anticipated. Gruppe Gallas would therefore be expected – at least initially – to meet the greatest resistance as German forces tightened their cordon. Gruppe Gallas was, therefore, reinforced with three additional ‘battalions’ prior to the operation. The reinforced Gruppe Gallas would advance to the south-south-east, Gruppe Spemann on a broad front to the south-west, and Gruppe Wortmann in a similar manner to the north-west, with Gruppe Scultetus holding a line in the south-west.

Operation *Spring Clean* and its immediate aftermath, 18–23 April 1943

MAP KEY

1 ***c.*1000hrs, 18 April:** Troops of Gruppe Gallas engage forward elements of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade near Rudnevo.

2 ***c.*1300hrs, 18 April:** Troops of Gruppe Gallas engage the principal strength of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade in defensive positions near Lunevka, not expecting to meet significant resistance until further south. The German advance is temporarily halted. German reinforcements are brought in to fight the partisans in this sector.

3 ***c.*0200hrs, 19 April:** Partisans of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade pull back to the area near Lake Lobno, with the other two partisan brigades pulling back to positions to the north-west of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade. Each side probes the positions and strength of the other.

4 ***c.*0900hrs, 20 April:** Having identified that the partisans had pulled back, a reinforced Gruppe Gallas launches a concerted attack against partisan positions in the area to the west of Lake Ale. There is particularly heavy fighting for the village of Sadki, which changes hands on a number of occasions according to partisan sources.

5 ***c.*0200hrs, 21 April:** Under heavy German pressure, the partisans pull back to the south-east, with the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade apparently covering the retreat of the other partisan brigades. Forward elements of Babakov's brigade run into forces of Gruppe Spemann in the region of Bol'shoe Kosarevo, however. By about 0900hrs, forces of Gruppe Spemann and Gruppe Gallas have pushed the partisans – who now seem to include Maksimenko's brigade – into a pocket in the forest which is raked with small-arms and artillery fire.

6 **1530–1600hrs, 21 April:** After renewed German attacks on the pocket, a German aircraft – probably a Fieseler Storch – appears over the partisans and drops leaflets demanding that they surrender.

7 **1800–2359hrs, 21 April:** In the face of continued German pressure, after dusk partisans are already seeking to break out of the cordon in small groups. At around midnight, 281. Sicherungs-Division issues order for Gruppe Spemann and Gruppe Wortmann to finish off the pocket at 0430hrs the following morning.

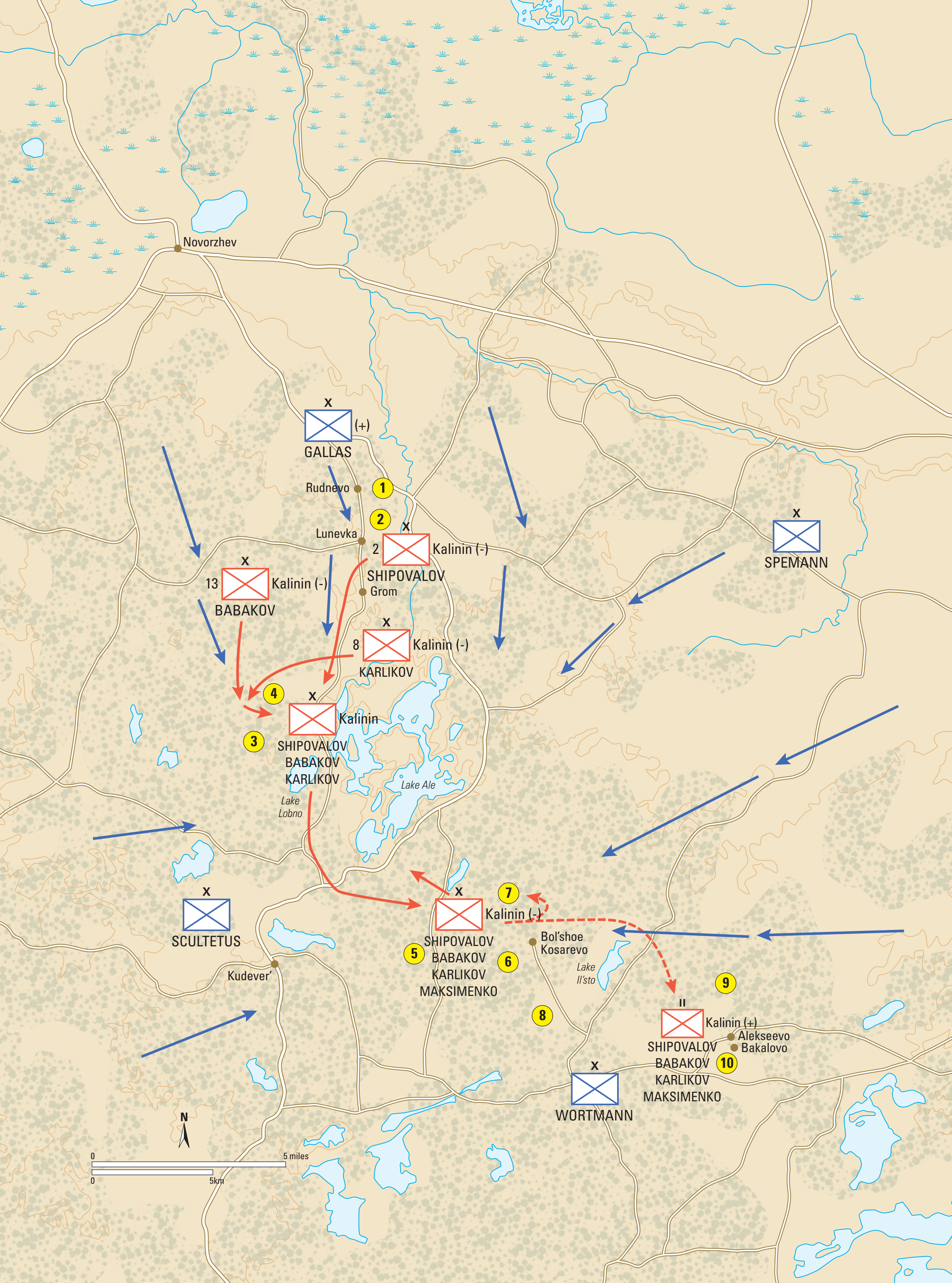
8 **After 0430hrs, 22 April:** In the face of a German push to destroy the pocket, many partisans are unable to break out, and are killed in heavy fighting. Some partisans are able to escape the cordon in small groups under cover of darkness, however.

9 **23 April:** A significant proportion of the forces of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade, having broken out of the first German encirclement, starts to concentrate in the Alekseevo–Bakalovo area to the south-east of the first pocket, and is soon joined by partisans from the brigades of Babakov, Karlikov and Maksimenko.

10 **1200–1400hrs, 23 April:** In operations beyond Operation *Spring Clean*, German reconnaissance forces, soon followed by greater strength, engage this second partisan concentration until nightfall and beyond, by which time at least some of the partisans are able to break out of the encirclement. Nevertheless, Soviet partisan strength in the Novorzhev–Kudever' area has either been destroyed, or fragmented and displaced.

Battlefield environment

Operation *Spring Clean* was to take place in the Kudever' and Novorzhev districts of the Kalinin Region – an area with dense forest, lakes and marshland and a low population density. The Kudever' District had a pre-war population of only 22,545 people for just under 796 square kilometres, with the town of Kudever' itself having an official population in 1939 of only 725. With few good roads, movement through the area would be difficult at any time of the year. Although the spring brought warmer temperatures and the deep snow of winter disappeared, melting snow would swell rivers and streams and hamper movement. Spring also brought with it the return of much of the foliage that would provide the partisans with welcome cover.


Novorzhev
X
GALLAS
(+)
Rudnevo
1
2
Lunevka
X
2
Kalinin (-)
SHIPOVALOV
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X
13
Kalinin (-)
BABAKOV
X
8
Kalinin (-)
KARLIKOV
X
SPEMANN
4
X
Kalinin
SHIPOVALOV
BABAKOV
KARLIKOV
3
Lake Lobno
Lake Ale
X
SCULTETUS
Kudever'
7
X
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5
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KARLIKOV
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INTO COMBAT

One of the more detailed partisan accounts of Operation *Spring Clean* is provided by Aleksandr Pavlovich Konstantinov, in mid-1943 the Deputy Commander for Reconnaissance of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade, led by Nikolai Shipovalov and often referred to as the 'Shipovalov' brigade. In the late 1960s, Konstantinov wrote memoirs of his wartime experiences, but material from them was only published after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. They give an unusually detailed and candid description of the impact of Operation *Spring Clean* on the Soviet partisans. His daughter, Ina Konstantinova, at that time 18 years old, also served with the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade. During Operation *Spring Clean* she seems to have been operating with elements of the brigade serving elsewhere, but she would be killed in combat in the spring of 1944, leaving behind a grieving father.

In mid-April 1943, four of the seven detachments of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade were operating in the Novorzhev and Kudever' districts, well aware that German forces were massing against them. Prior to the start of German operations on 18 April, the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade was deployed in villages including Lunevka and Grom north of Kudever', aware that also to the north and north-west of Kudever' were the brigades of Karlikov and Babakov.

On the morning of 18 April, partisan reconnaissance discovered that German forces were moving towards them from the Novorzhev direction, and at about 1000hrs they engaged forward elements of the German force in the area of the village of Rudnevo. At this point the bulk of the brigade took up defensive positions in the area of the village of Lunevka and awaited the German onslaught. They didn't have long to wait – by 1300hrs, forward elements of the German force had reached the partisans' defensive positions situated on higher ground. From a German perspective, as expected, on this first day of the operation the bicycle troops of Gruppe Gallas moving in from the north and north-west would meet heavy resistance from partisan forces, such that they would be unable to advance any further that day.

According to Konstantinov, the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade was able to defend its positions against Gruppe Gallas until 0200hrs on 19 April, when the partisans took advantage of the cover of night to relocate to positions at Lobno, about 9km north of Kudever'. Certainly, the intensity of the fighting on the axis of advance for Gruppe Gallas meant that on 19 April, alongside Radfahr-Regiment 3 and the cavalrymen of 1. and 2./OstReiterAbt 281, German reserves, including I./PolRgt 9 from the divisional reserve, were thrown in to fight against the three partisan brigades identified as facing them.

As the partisans pulled back during the early part of 19 April, they sowed mines and blew up bridges to delay their pursuers. For the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade at least – according to Konstantinov – the remainder of 19 April saw little action, but instead intensive reconnaissance by both sides (Konstantinov 2013: 224). At about 0900hrs on 20 April, however, German forces renewed their attack, with fierce fighting seeing one village, Sadki, apparently change hands multiple times. Certainly, after German forces had been massed to overcome the partisan defensive positions previously encountered, it was

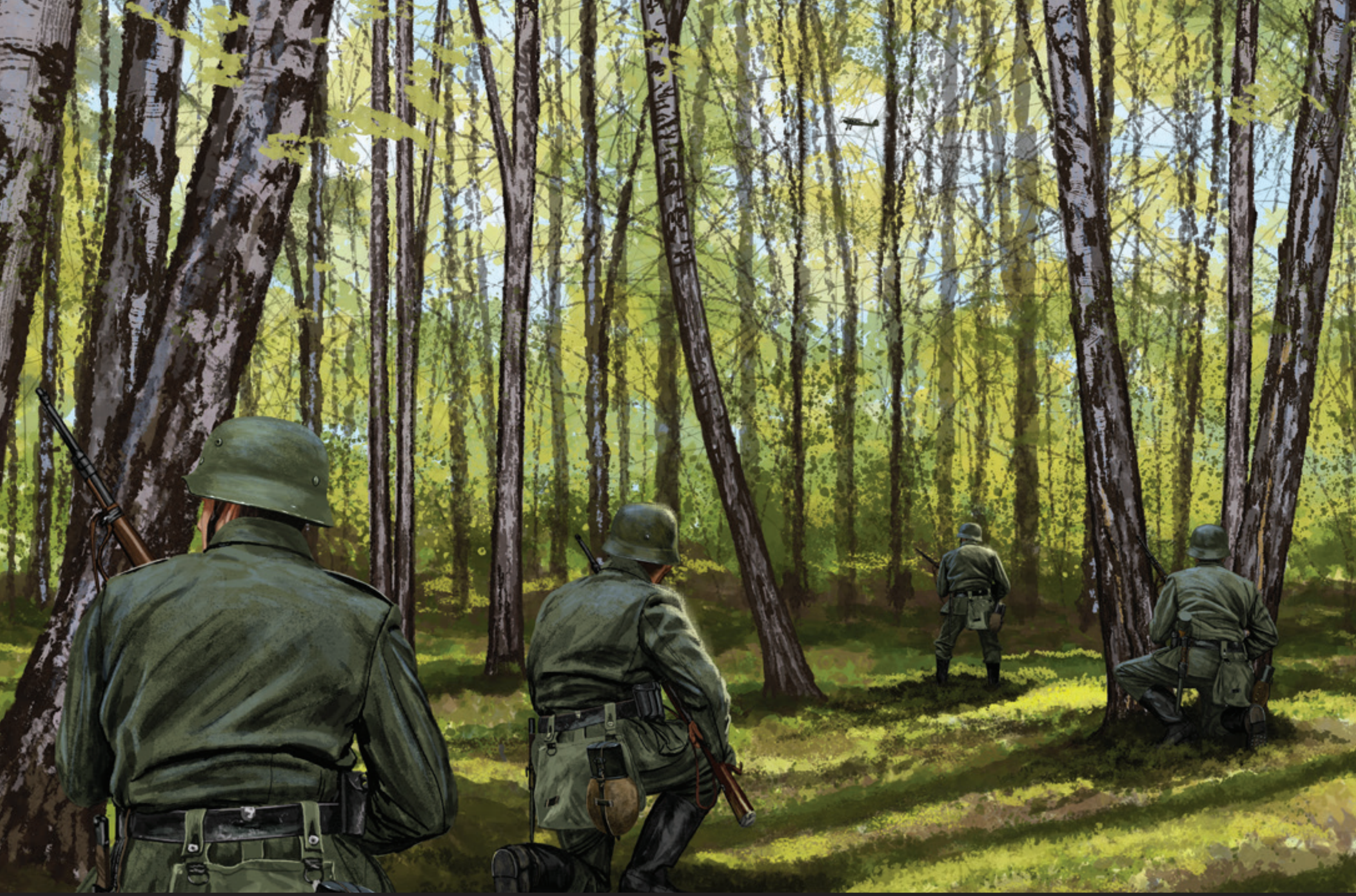
Troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 advance behind a *Beute* or captured tank – in this instance, of French origin – during the winter of 1942/43. Although such tanks were of little value at the front line, they had considerable utility against poorly equipped partisans without the weapons to defeat even light tanks' thin armour. A number of *Beute* tanks were used during Operation *Spring Clean* in April 1943. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

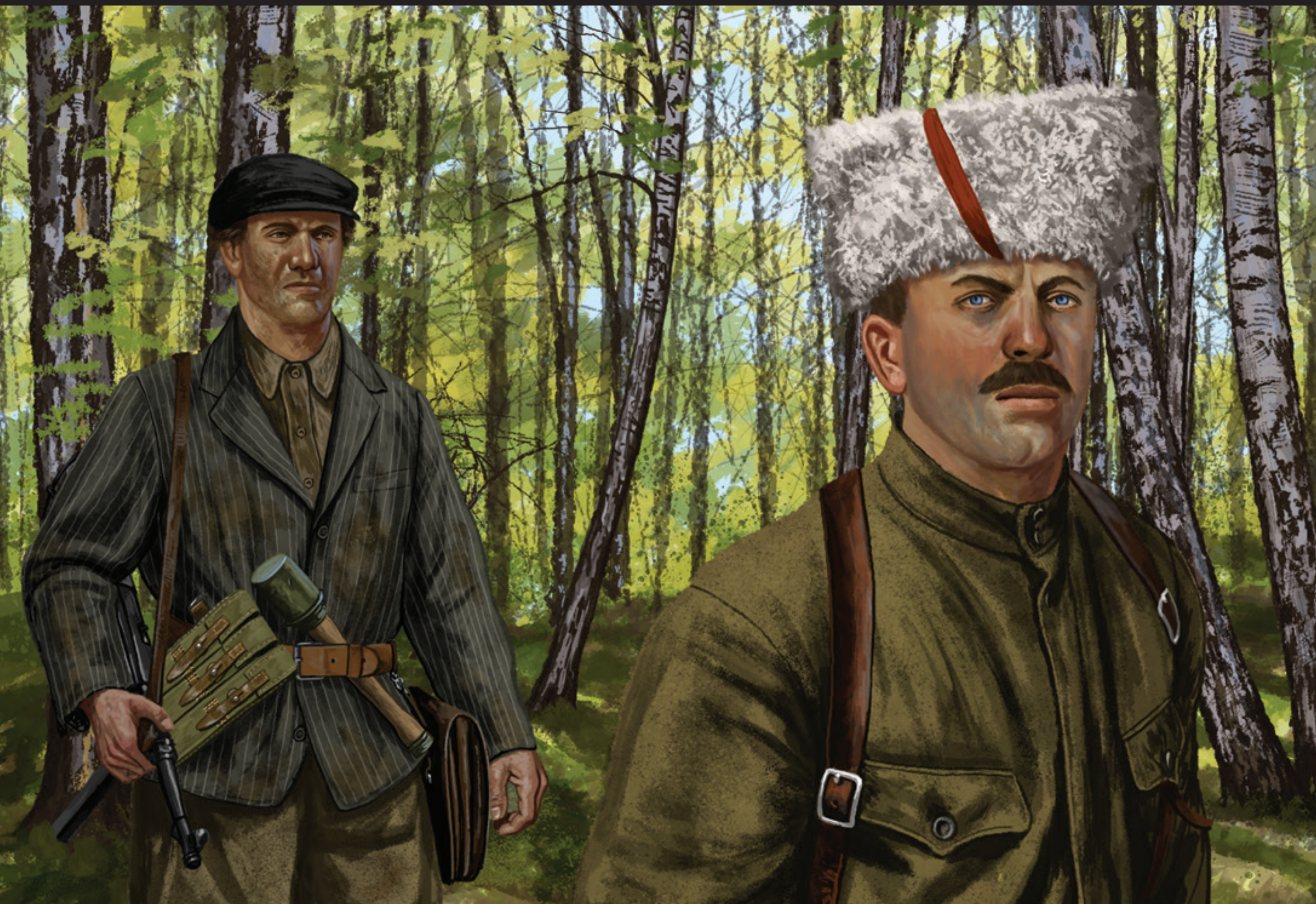
soon discovered that the partisans had pulled back to the south, and Gruppe Gallas is reported to have subsequently pushed forward on 20 April in the face of stiff resistance to a line about 15km south of Novorzhev.

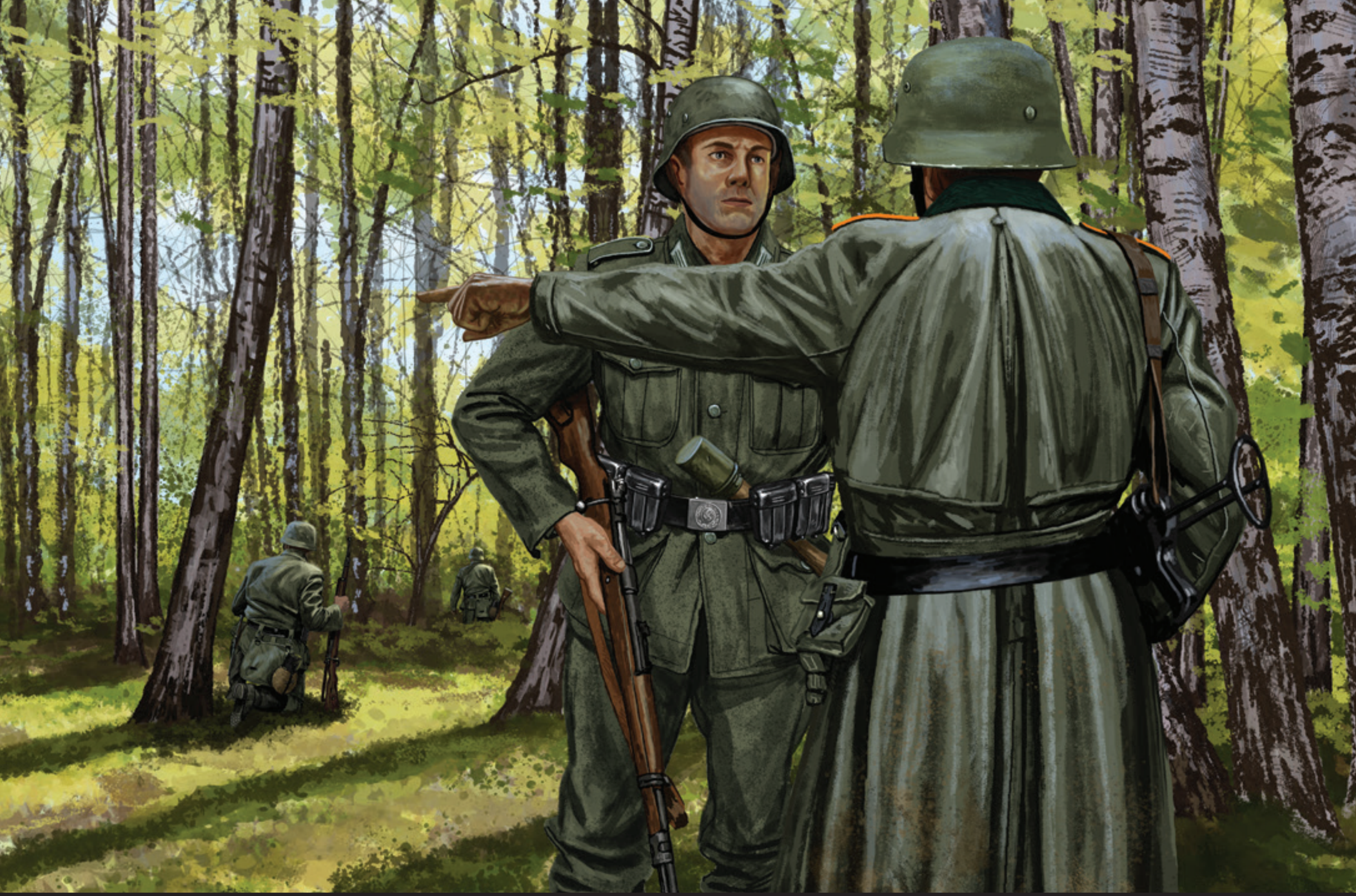
The next day, 21 April, under intense German pressure the partisans sought to escape into the forest between Lake Ale and Kudever' to the south and south-east, with the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade apparently covering the retreat of its neighbours. The lead detachment of Babakov's partisans ran into Axis resistance near Bol'shoe Kosarevo, and after an engagement lasting about half an hour reportedly headed deeper into the forest. With the partisans having broken away from Gruppe Gallas, they had, according to German reports, run into forces of Gruppe Spemann advancing from the east as the noose tightened. Certainly, German forces were by now aware that the partisans were now concentrated to the east of Kudever'. According to Konstantinov, German forces pressing in on the partisans surrounded the forest and raked it with fire from mortars and automatic weapons (Konstantinov 2013: 224). In the face of this fire, some of the neighbouring units apparently sought to retreat to the north-west in disarray, only to be met by fire from Axis automatic weapons. Thankfully for the partisans, with reinforcement they were able to stabilize the situation. Konstantinov makes particular note of the actions of a machine-gun platoon under the command of one Konovalov; four Soviet machine guns fired upon the enemy force, allowing the other detachments of the partisan brigade to take up defensive positions (Konstantinov 2013: 224). Nevertheless, the German noose was tightening around the partisans.

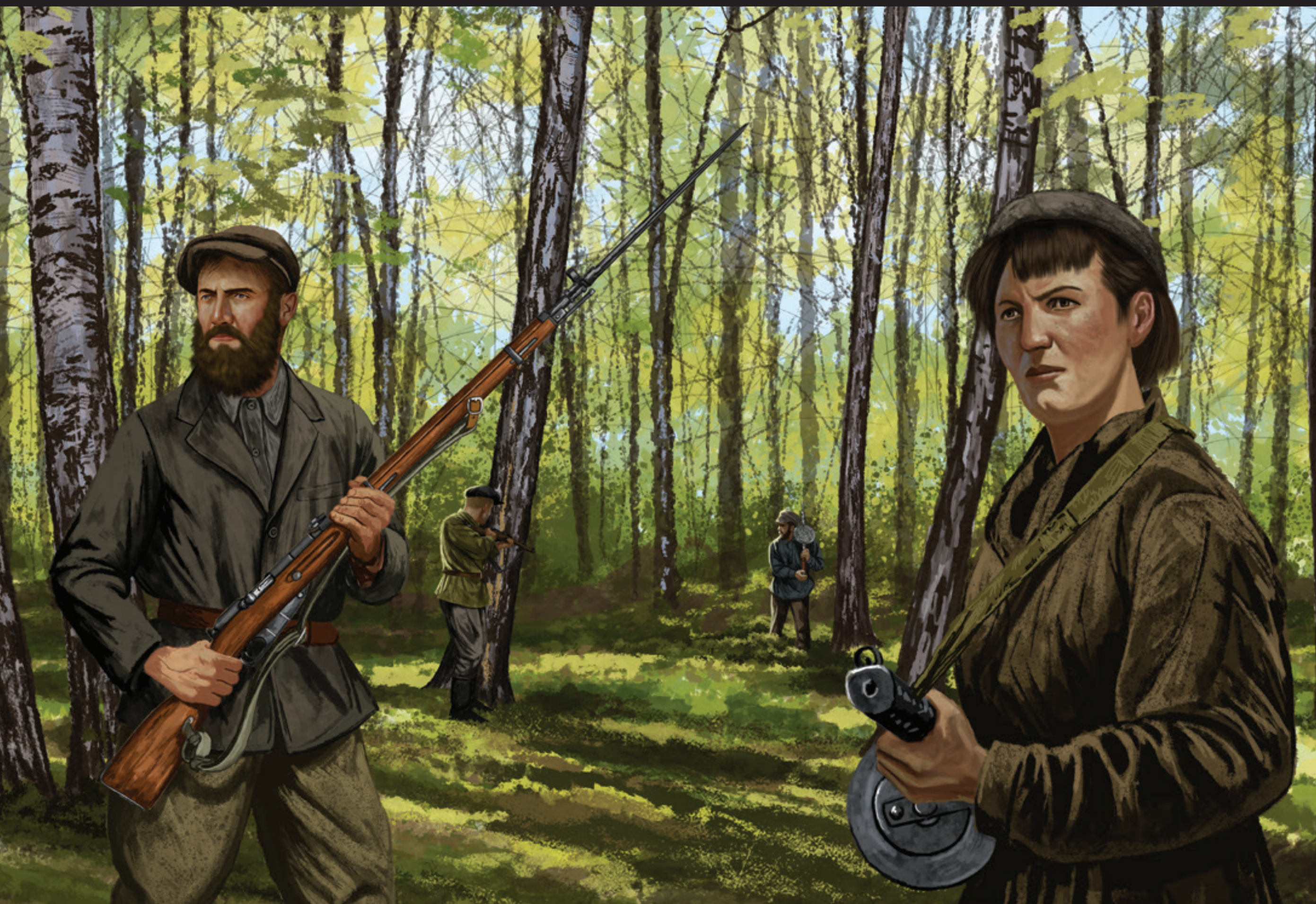
At 1600hrs an Axis aircraft appeared over the partisans. Although the partisans braced themselves for aerial bombing, instead they were showered with leaflets calling for their surrender (Konstantinov 2013: 224). After a couple of hours German forces once again pressed forwards. By the latter part of the day on 21 April, German sources described the enemy as 'fully encircled' (US NA T-315-1872-000093). At midnight, 281. Sicherungs-Division gave the order for Gruppe Wortmann and elements of Gruppe Spemann to wipe out the encircled partisans, with Gruppe Scultetus holding the line to the west.

There is little doubt that considerable damage was caused to the encircled partisans as German forces moved to crush them during 21–22 April. It seems once again, however, that after heavy fighting at least some of the partisans were saved by nightfall on 21 April; later that night, covered by fire from automatic weapons, some partisans were able to break out of the encirclement,

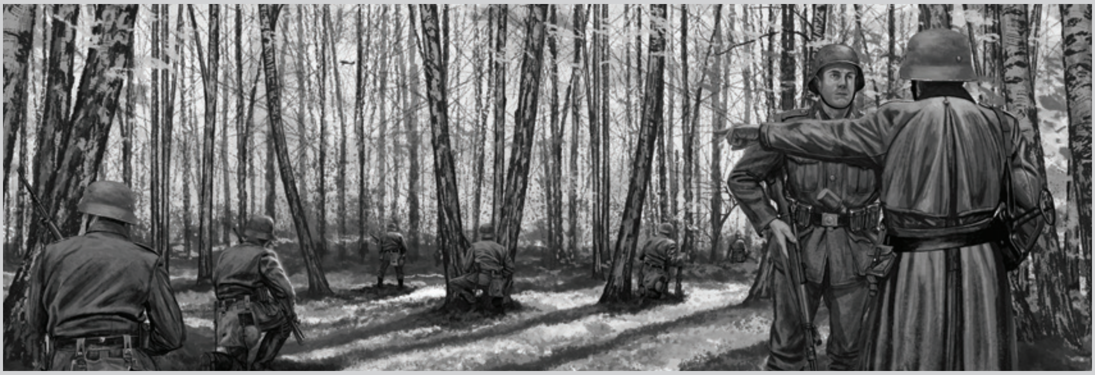




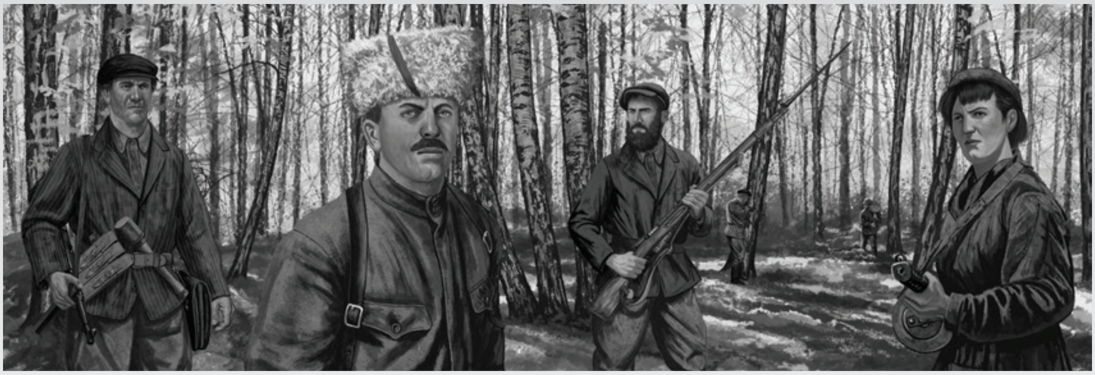




Operation *Spring Clean*



German view: It is the afternoon of 21 April 1943. After heavy engagement with partisans of at least three Kalinin partisan brigades north and east of Kudever', forces of 281. Sicherungs-Division – with additional support from outside the division – are pushing the partisans into a smaller and smaller area of forest. Troops of one of the security regiments – possibly of III./SichRgt 107 with Gruppe Gallas, or I./SichRgt 94 with Gruppe Spemann – are close on the heels of a group of partisans seeking cover deeper in the forest. German troops have only minimal equipment with them – bayonets, bread bags, water bottles and canteens in addition to their belt pouches with Kar 98k ammunition and the odd M24 *Stielgranate* stick grenade – so as not to hinder their movement through the spring forest or make unnecessary noise. The riflemen shown are moving cautiously in the direction in which the partisans were last seen heading. A *Feldgendarme*, armed with an MP 40 submachine gun, is pointing in the direction of a small village from which some of the local partisans are known to have originated. Quite possibly the partisans will seek to pass through the village in search of food. In the sky above them a Fieseler Storch observation aircraft – one of the advantages held by the hunters over the hunted – is also on the look-out for movement in the forest.



Soviet view: Having been either engaged with German security forces or evading them for more than three days, these partisans of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade are increasingly low on food and ammunition, and aware that a noose seems to be tightening around them. Their commander, wearing one of the distinctive *kubanka* hats with red ribbon detail so popular with partisan commanders in the region, is consulting with his commissar on their next move. The partisans are dressed in a mix of military and civilian clothing, and equipped with a variety of weapons. While two have trusty Mosin-Nagant M1891/30 rifles, a third has a captured German MP 40 submachine gun slung over his shoulder and one of the few grenades – a captured M24 *Stielgranate* – that the partisans have remaining. The female partisan has a PPSh-41 submachine gun, and behind her one of her comrades has a DP Model 1927 light machine gun. The question under discussion seems to be whether to aim to reach a nearby village before nightfall in the hope of finding food, or whether such a move might prove too risky with the large number of German security troops in the area.

moving through the forest and marsh and across streams and rivers that were by this time overflowing (Konstantinov 2013: 224). The decision not simply to stand and fight seems to have been taken in part because the partisans were running out of ammunition.

According to Konstantinov, by 23 April his brigade was able to break out of the first encirclement nearer Kudever' more or less intact and push further east. The other brigades apparently did not fare as well, however. When Maksimenko's brigade – now also caught up in the German anti-partisan operation – sought to break out of the encirclement it lost much of its strength in the process. One group that managed to escape included the young female partisan with the family name Bakhtiukova, who as part of a group of seven partisans ultimately managed to make her way to the Rossonovskii District in the Belorussian Vitebsk Region.

According to Konstantinov, by the morning of 23 April at least, elements of the brigades of Babakov, Karlikov and Maksimenko had made their way into the same area further east as much of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade, having been splintered and scattered by the German troops or deliberately broken into small groups to increase their chances of escape. By midday, the survivors, numbering in the hundreds, were ready to face renewed attacks by German forces that continued to attack from different directions. Again, that night, the partisans – hungry, tired and deprived of sleep – sought to make their escape. By the 'night of 25 April' (RGASPI f69.o1.d353.l.14ob), when the strength of the main partisan force was down to about 500, while some still sought to break away from their attackers to continue their struggle in German-occupied territory, others sought to try to get through to Soviet lines. Some of the local partisans would discard their weapons and try to make it back home.

Unable to get food from nearby villages controlled by the Germans, the command of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade ultimately decided to try to head towards the Velikaia River to the south-west. In a report of 27 April, the 12th Kalinin Partisan Brigade reported that although some of the partisans who had managed to escape the German encirclement had made it to Soviet lines, elements of Shipovalov's brigade were indeed moving into the Pustoshkinskii District to the south-west. The escape of much of Shipovalov's brigade was certainly not without further incident. In a report of 29 April, the brigade was reported as having encountered Cossack cavalry they had engaged back on 21 April, but this time far to the south, about 21km north-west of Pustoshka – probably the same encounter of 27 April with a platoon-strength patrol of Cossacks noted in Konstantinov's memoirs. Having ambushed the 'traitors', seven Cossacks were reported as killed, with the partisans gathering a number of trophy weapons and documents in the aftermath (Konstantinov 2013: 225). Having then crossed the Velikaia River, only at the end of May were the remnants of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade finally able to break off from pursuing German forces.

During Operation *Spring Clean* and its aftermath, Konstantinov reported that his 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade lost 15 killed, 12 wounded and roughly 50 missing, most of whom joined Karlikov's and Babakov's brigades (Konstantinov 2013: 225). At least some of those who had ended up with other brigades were probably also killed. Partisans killed in the fighting certainly numbered in the hundreds, with many others captured,

The original caption for this photograph reads 'A sunny winter's day – comrades in snow smocks'. Distinguishing between different types of German troops in winter would be particularly difficult for Soviet partisans and civilians, even if such distinctions might have seemed arbitrary, in particular from a civilian point of view. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

some of whom were probably executed. According to 281. Sicherungs-Division, during the primary operation in the period 18–22 April, 'early results' as of 25 April stated there were '424 enemy kills (counted), with a further 141 assumed, 61 captured', with 'many weapons and much ammunition of all types, 389 horses and 25 carts' captured (US NA T-315-1872-000089). Partisan accounts acknowledge that large numbers of horses and carts, along with wounded partisans, had to be abandoned to the Germans. While some of the 'partisans' killed may have been civilians caught up in the horror, the fact that German sources note the capture of 122 rifles along with a small number of submachine guns, heavier machine guns and light mortars highlights the fact that many partisan combatants were indeed killed. Typically, the partisans sought not to leave weapons to the enemy.

Certainly, heavy fighting continued after 22 April: of 32 local partisans from the Dubrovskii '*sel'sovet*' killed during the entire war, from the equivalent of a parish, five were killed on 23–24 April during fighting immediately after Operation *Spring Clean* was officially over, with a further nine going missing during 21–23 April. In Memorial Books for the Kudever' and Novorzhev districts, German historian Jürgen Kilian notes that for April 1943 there are 376 named victims of the occupation, of whom 322 are listed as having been partisans. As Kilian notes, the horrendous partisan losses in this instance might in part be explained by the combination of encirclement with a German superiority in firepower on 21 April that proved lethally effective (Kilian 2012: 574). While a significant part of the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade remained in German-occupied territory, along with elements of the other brigades, by mid-May only about 150 partisans from the brigades that had been targeted by Operation *Spring Clean* had been accounted for in the Soviet rear, although individual survivors and small groups of partisans made their way out of German-occupied territory (RGASPI f69.o1.d353.l.14ob).

The human cost of the operation for the Soviet population did not end with the fighting against the partisans, for anti-partisan operations were followed by a '*Säuberung*'. Along with the rounding up and often execution of suspected partisans, by this stage of the war there was a greater attempt to secure local labour power – in particular among younger inhabitants who might otherwise join the partisans – by sending workers to Germany as *Ostarbeiter*.

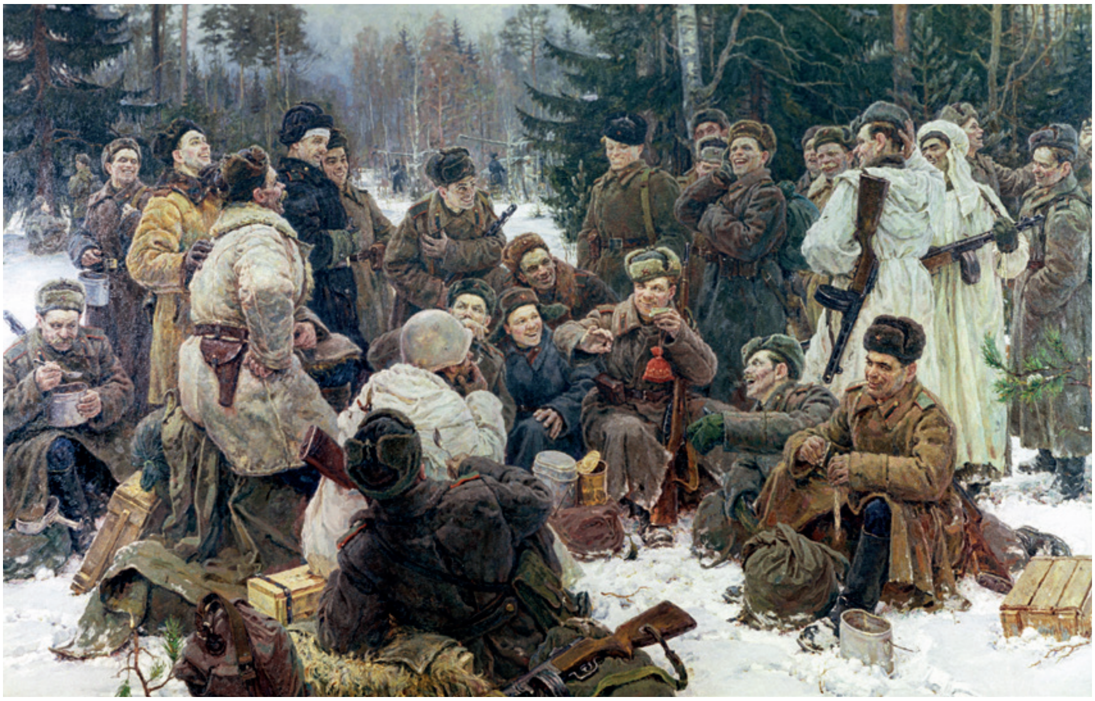
Apparently, German losses in the primary operation during 18–22 April were comparably light: 11 killed and 45 wounded, of whom five killed and 21 wounded were former Soviet personnel. Numbers killed and wounded during the fighting in the days after the primary operation certainly will have added more casualties to these totals, however. During the primary operation, German troops were in a more favourable position to bring superior force and firepower to bear than during the aftermath.

Analysis

LESSONS LEARNT: THE SOVIETS

The hastily organized, ill-equipped and poorly trained partisan units of 1941 had achieved little of note, and had perhaps lulled German forces into a false sense of security in the occupied territories of north-west Russia. As 1941 passed into 1942, in the Leningrad Region in particular efforts were made to bring the surviving partisans of 1941 together, augment their strength, better equip and supply them, and co-ordinate their activities. In some ways the success of the partisans at Kholm – even if not of the wider operation – was testimony to these efforts. Very soon, partisan strength in the forests of the region was such that the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade could declare that it was in control of a 'partisan zone' in the German rear. Controlling such a zone was not just good propaganda; it made supply from the local population easier, and even allowed the partisans deep inside the zone to establish more permanent base areas. The successful attack on Iasski highlighted that the partisans – locals stiffened with well-trained cadres from the Soviet rear – could take on German forces and win when they were able to take advantage of the element of surprise and field superior strength, before melting back into the forests and returning to their base areas.

Even so, in many ways the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade was rather too successful in building up strength and controlling territory, because at a certain stage a partisan formation such as the brigade would be subject to the attention of German commanders outside of the immediate locality. When German forces were sufficiently strong and equipped with the sort of firepower unavailable to the partisans, the partisans were no match for them in open combat. When controlling or exerting considerable influence over a 'partisan zone', the partisans were in many ways compelled to engage the Germans in combat that played to Axis strengths. The partisans were in such circumstances forced to defend a local population under their responsibility



A reproduction of a 1951 painting entitled 'Rest after the Battle' by Yuri Mikhailovich Neprintsev (1909–96) from the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Given the composition and clothing of these partisans, it is highly likely that the painting represents a detachment sent from Soviet lines and specifically tasked with committing acts of sabotage and 'diversion'. (Sputnik 742554)

and fixed assets on which they had become increasingly reliant. The destruction of the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone' in September 1942 was simply a matter of German forces eventually concentrating sufficient force against it.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone', partisan units were clearly both reluctant and unable to repeat the experiment on the same scale. Instead, while sacrificing base areas and more stable supply, they regained much of their mobility and flexibility plus the ability to avoid superior German forces when they were not subjected to a major anti-partisan operation.

The January 1942 Kholm operation was an early example of how the activities of the partisans could potentially benefit the Red Army – if there was sufficient co-ordination. In a key order of September 1942, 'On the Tasks of the Partisan Movement', Stalin outlined how the partisan movement could assist the Red Army not only by destroying German assets, but also, for example, by carrying out reconnaissance. Increasingly organized as a regular force behind enemy lines, although many partisans were dressed as civilians they were part of units led by uniformed personnel subject to the scrutiny of political commissars. Such units were increasingly taking orders by radio from Soviet lines and reporting back to the Red Army and their superiors through personnel attached to an adjacent Red Army front. Some of the information used in building up a picture of the impact of Operation *Spring Clean* on the partisans came from reconnaissance files of the Kalinin (Regional) Headquarters of the Partisan Movement.

As local German strength waned, and it became apparent that German fortunes at the front line were deteriorating, the willingness of the local population to risk helping or even joining the partisans increased. In order to take advantage of this situation, existing partisan brigades were sometimes broken up so that some of their more experienced personnel might form core cadres of new brigades. At this time the partisans were increasingly likely to distinguish between low-level collaboration with German forces by locals born out of necessity, and more wholehearted collaboration. By the middle of the war low-level collaborators in particular were often not simply executed as traitors as they might have been early in the war, but – if not joining the partisans in the forest – were encouraged to lead dangerous double lives as collaborators and Soviet spies. This greatly aided partisan intelligence gathering in particular, even if many such partisan 'sympathizers' would lose their lives when they came under the suspicion of German forces.

LESSONS LEARNT: THE GERMANS

The three actions covered in this book illustrate aspects of the partisan and anti-partisan war in the German-occupied territory of the north-western region of the Soviet Union over a period of more than a year. During that period German forces undoubtedly got better at providing security for key towns and settlements, and became more effective in conducting anti-partisan operations, while in many ways losing the anti-partisan war. The partisan war was not just about tactical or operational successes such as those achieved during Operation *Spring Clean*, but also about winning the 'hearts and minds' of the civilian population so that the partisan threat could not be rejuvenated and sustained.

Until late in the war, the partisans were rarely able to repeat successes like those at Iasski and Kholm, as German forces fortified key towns and settlements in their rear areas and were unlikely to leave small vulnerable garrisons deep in territory threatened by the partisans. A factor in adopting this approach was the fact that the number of Axis troops of reasonable quality permanently available for rear-area security tasks dropped as the war progressed. Later in the war, for example, many of the police battalions under Himmler's control were transferred out of the Wehrmacht's rear areas. By concentrating diminishing resources in a smaller area – with mobile forces sallying forth to try to take German authority into the hinterland and along lines of communication – German forces left increasingly large areas to the partisans. As partisan strength increased in those areas, the potential for the partisans to threaten the areas still subject to a greater degree of German control increased. Soon, partisan concentrations became sufficiently large that they demanded a German response.

Major German anti-partisan operations such as Operation *Spring Clean* became a regular occurrence in occupied territory during 1942 and 1943. German forces had learnt the importance of careful planning and co-ordination of the forces involved in such operations to ensure that, in particular if partisans did not choose to stand and fight, they were less likely to be able to escape. In the aftermath of such operations, a ruthless '*Säuberung*' of the area in which the partisans had been operating was almost as important as the primary operation itself. Here the aim was not only to root out any partisans still in the area, but to deny the partisans further local support. This

Troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 deployed during an anti-partisan operation in 1943. The police troops were well provided for in terms of automatic weapons and appropriate clothing. Their *Osttruppen* and even Wehrmacht *Landesschützen* counterparts – the latter by 1943 being described simply as *Sicherungs* units – were not necessarily as well-equipped. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

removal of local support might involve executing those suspected of being partisans or 'sympathizers', or removing the local population from an area that German forces were unlikely to be able to control. In the case of removing the population, surviving civilians would either end up as refugees, or in the case of many young people be conscripted for *Ostarbeiter* labour service back in the Reich. Villages were frequently razed to the ground – sometimes as a means of punishing the local population for tolerating a partisan presence, willingly or otherwise, but always to deny the partisans food and shelter. Such brutality might have served German purposes in the short-term, but in the longer term it merely fuelled the hatred of German forces and encouraged the local population to support the partisans.

Although the German command rewarded some local collaborators for their support, and for a period in the middle of the occupation seemed to be trying to be less indiscriminate in its assumptions about who was a 'partisan' and to be treated as such, such German patronage was fleeting and of little value if you were not going to live to enjoy it. For those in any doubt about which side to support in this brutal struggle – when not taking sides was extremely challenging – the scales were tipped by the fact that it was increasingly clear that Germany was losing the war.

Troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 head out from the town of Sebezh on an anti-partisan operation sometime during the winter of 1942/43. During this period, German forces in the wider region were making a concerted effort to deal with a number of large concentrations of partisans, including operations against one further north in the Novorzhev–Kudever' area. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

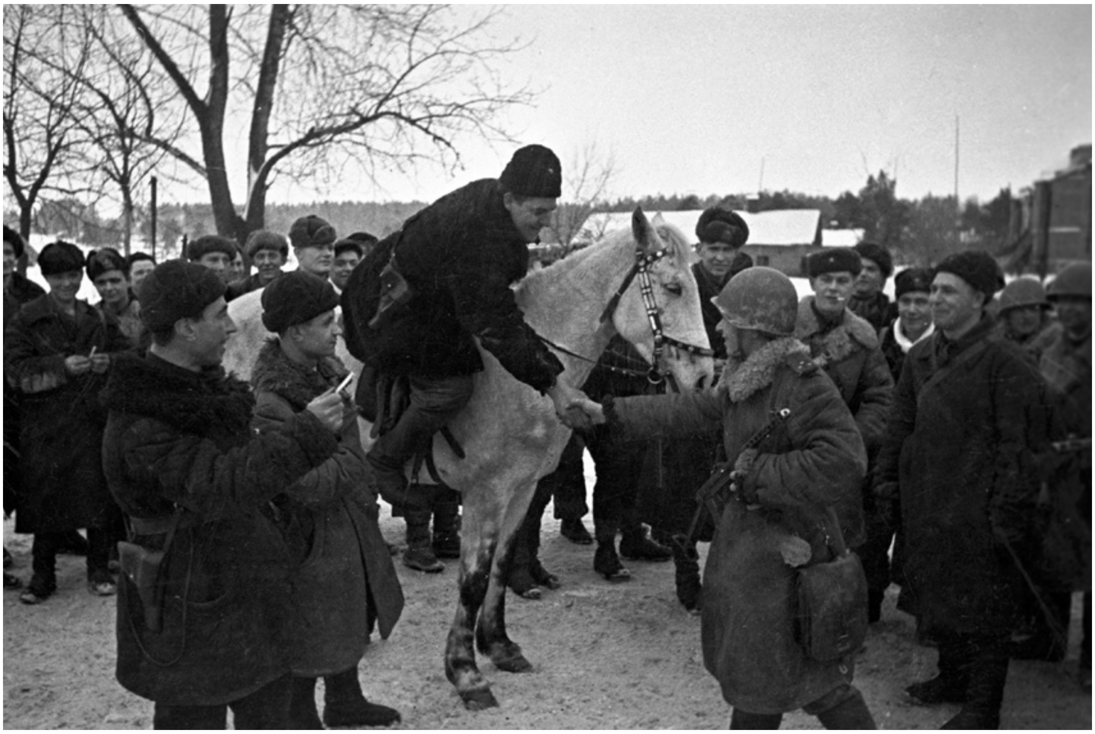
Aftermath

Operation *Spring Clean* caused significant damage to the Kalinin Region's partisan detachments that had been operating in the Kudever' and Novorzhev districts prior to the operation. Similar Axis operations to the north and south had hit other partisan formations hard too, including successor units to the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade. It took some time for partisan strength to recover, but the partisans had been suppressed, not destroyed.

As German forces committed to rear-area security on a day-to-day basis declined further during 1943, even with many partisan formations suppressed German forces could not protect all of their assets at any one time. During the summer of 1943, partisans across the Soviet Union were ordered by the TsShPD to take advantage of this situation in undertaking the 'War of the Rails', during which partisan units sought to destroy as much railway track on key German lines of communication as possible. Partisans could also deny German forces control of an increasing amount of territory – meaning that they could not, for example, effectively exploit it economically – while not necessarily going as far as controlling it themselves.

BELOW LEFT
Troops of Polizei-Regiment 9 watch as a village burns, no doubt as part of a post-operation '*Säuberung*' in 1942 or 1943. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)

BELOW RIGHT
Personnel of Polizei-Regiment 9 on their way to bury fallen comrades in what might be Sebezh in Heeresgruppe Nord's rear areas in 1943. The barricades highlight the extent to which German forces had been forced to take security measures in towns against the possibility of partisan attack. (Courtesy of Otto Bartsch)



Partisans greet advancing Red Army troops in Luga, Leningrad Region, in February 1944. Many of the partisans would soon find themselves drafted into the Red Army. (Sputnik 1230)

German lines of communication were not necessarily crippled by partisan efforts in the summer of 1943, but the effort required to keep Axis lines of communication to the front line open was considerable, and came at the expense of commitments elsewhere.

In late 1943, as the Red Army made progress to the south of the areas in which the partisan brigades concerned in this book were operating – and it was apparent that Soviet power would return to those areas soon too – recruitment to partisan units reached new highs. Rather than be forced to retreat with German forces, as part of the process of which they might have been forced into *Ostarbeiter* service, many younger civilians in particular joined the partisans. Even many collaborators, sometimes whole units of *Osttruppen*, went over to the partisans in an attempt to absolve their guilt before the Motherland. Partisan units were forced, once again, to defend civilians and territory in an attempt to mitigate the cost of German withdrawal from the region. Thanks to the overwhelming strength of the Red Army by this time, however, it was not long before Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS formations, along with remaining units of indigenous collaborators, had pulled out of Russian territory, with many ending up in the territory of the Baltic republics. It was in Vilnius that Wachtmeister der Schutzpolizei der Reserve (Reserve Sergeant) Otto Bartsch, who had chronicled the activities of his unit and ultimately provided many of the photographs used in this book, was killed.

With German forces in retreat, and the Red Army returning, many of the partisans who had been fighting the enemy in occupied territory soon found themselves conscripted into the Red Army. Some would be killed as part of Red Army units, while others would finally make it home to a liberated Soviet Union.

UNIT ORGANIZATIONS

Soviet

The basic unit for Soviet partisans started off as the detachment – anything from platoon to company strength – although as 1941 progressed, detachments were being amalgamated into brigades. One of the earliest partisan brigades was the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade. In late July 1941, the 'brigade' – only 100 strong – was sent from Soviet lines into the Serbolovskii Forest. The brigade grew from this paltry strength to roughly 600 troops by late August, and almost 1,000 in September as partisan detachments were incorporated into it and it drew upon the local population and escaped PoWs. Early detachments incorporated into the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade included the 'Budenovets' and 'Khrabrii' detachments. By 1 January 1942, after German anti-partisan operations at the end of 1941, the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade consisted of ten detachments with a total of about 900 partisans, but was soon able to recoup losses from the population –young people in particular – of its base areas and bring its strength to nearly 1,200. At this time its ten detachments were divided among three regiments in an effort to better organize groups of detachments for attacks on significant German garrisons. The headquarters for the whole brigade now included a Political Department and a Special Section for counter-intelligence. February 1942 reinforcements for the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade did not just come from occupied territory, but also included two detachments – a total of 203 partisans – sent by the North-Western Front from Soviet lines.

By the summer of 1942, the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade had grown into a large and increasingly unwieldy formation. Adding a little more flexibility, in mid-May the three regiments of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade were ordered to create special diversion or sabotage groups of four partisans each – nine groups in total for the brigade – to be at least 50 per cent equipped with automatic weapons. With further reinforcement, including the 5th Leningrad Partisan Brigade, collapsed into a regiment, the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade had reached a strength of more than 2,200 partisans by the time German forces sought in earnest to destroy the 'Leningrad Partisan Zone'. By this point it consisted of five regiments with approximately 450 partisans each.

At the time of the destruction of the 'Partisan Zone', the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade was much larger than subsequent partisan brigades operating in the region, such as the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade, which was one of the brigades hit hard by German forces during Operation *Spring Clean* in April 1943. Around this time the 2nd Kalinin Partisan Brigade consisted of seven detachments and a machine-gun platoon, with detachments varying in size from 58 to 87 strong for a total strength of 658 partisans, according to one set of returns to the Kalinin Headquarters of the Partisan Movement. Of these, 484 were armed with rifles and 98 with submachine guns, with the brigade as a whole having 31 light machine guns distributed among the seven detachments. Two heavy machine guns were part of Konovalov's machine-gun platoon with a strength of 48 personnel – 32 with rifles and ten with submachine guns along with the heavy machine guns. Three mortars and two anti-tank rifles added a little more firepower, but still left it very much outgunned by the better German units of equivalent size. It is also worth noting that the brigade had only a single radio – communication within the brigade was by runner.

Leningrad partisans with an anti-tank gun. In this case the gun was apparently initially abandoned by retreating German forces in an encounter in 1941. It was subsequently hidden by the local population in a river until two years later when there were large partisan forces in the area – the 5th Leningrad Partisan Brigade – that could recover and use the weapon. Rarely did partisans have such firepower, and if they did acquire such weapons, then poor manoeuvrability across difficult terrain and shortcomings in ammunition supply were both likely to be serious issues. The use of a light anti-tank gun by partisans on 18 January 1942 at Sopki, to the west of Kholm, was far from typical. (MacLaren Sovfoto 938)

German

German security divisions were essentially light infantry divisions for rear area security, with a mixture of better-quality troops for active operations (an *Eingreif-Gruppe* – literally an 'intervention group') and less mobile and lower-quality personnel (*Sicherungs- und Ordnungstruppen* – security and police troops) intended for security functions and the maintenance of order – troops that included the personnel of local *Feldkommandanturen* and *Ortskommandanturen* and personnel for *Dulage* (PoW camps).

At the beginning of the war against the Soviet Union in June 1941, 281. Sicherungs-Division was based around a reinforced infantry regiment for active operations – verstärktes Infanterie-Regiment 368 – with a core strength of three battalions of bicycle troops. Landesschützen-Regiment 107 served as the primary security component for the division, with four battalions of *Landesschützen* and one *Wachbataillon* (guard battalion), with Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 2 (mot.) attached for the same purpose. By mid-February 1942, troops drawn from the Soviet population were making their appearance in the division's strength, including, for example, Estnisches Sicherungs-Abteilung *Põltsamaa* and a 'Cossack' squadron.

By April 1943, on the eve of Operation *Spring Clean*, 281. Sicherungs-Division was still nominally based around Grenadier-Regiment 368 and Sicherungs-Regiment 107, and had been reinforced with III./PolRgt 9, all three battalions of that regiment having been attached in late January 1943. In April the division also had a number of additional regiment- and battalion-strength units drawn from among the Soviet population, including Ost-Reiter-Abteilung 281 and Estnisches Schutzmannschaft-Front-Bataillon 39 (with Estnisches Schutzmannschaft-Front-Bataillon 40 also attached in January), with Armenisches Infanterie-Bataillon I./198 and Nordkaukasisches Halb-Bataillone 842 and 843 also attached by April. 281. Sicherungs-Division had little artillery – in April 1943, it had only the 12 guns of II./AR 207 – but it also had 17 *Beute* 'Renault' tanks in its inventory. With Grenadier-Regiment 368 often deployed at the front, the security division was increasingly reliant on the *Landesschützen-Bataillone*, police battalions and battalions raised from former Soviet PoWs and the populations of the Baltic republics.

The battalion-level units of the security division varied wildly in strengths and capabilities, and were usually well under list strength. In January 1943, Estnisches Schutzmannschaft-Front-Bataillon 39 had a combat strength of only 121 men, armed with 121 rifles, 27 light machine guns, ten heavy machine guns and nine light mortars. II./PolRgt 9 could field 264 men, armed with 264 rifles, 28 light machine guns, 12 heavy machine guns and nine light mortars. Locally raised *Einwohner-Kampf-Abteilungen* attached to *Feldkommandanturen* were particularly weak units, with the EKA for Feldkommandantur 186 in early 1943 having only 55 men armed with 55 rifles and two light machine guns. As illustration of how understrength many units were, in theory, each police battalion was supposed to be – depending on the period of the war – 500–700 strong. As is apparent from many of the photographs in this book relating to Polizei-Regiment 9 (later known as SS-Polizei-Regiment 9), however, these understrength battalions could draw on regimental assets that included an anti-tank company equipped with 3.7cm PaK 36 or captured Soviet guns, as well as a Panzer company with *Beute* tanks.

A typical *Landesschützen* (*Sicherungs*) battalion – perhaps the most frequently encountered German security unit in Wehrmacht-controlled territory – had four companies throughout the war. Each company was at the beginning of the war 143 strong, with a core strength of three platoons. Each 45-strong platoon consisted largely of riflemen, with 35 rifles, ten pistols and four light machine guns per platoon at the beginning of the war, with a heavy machine gun listed in divisional tables of organization for such units in the East. As of 21 January 1943, however, 3./SichRgt 107 had a combat strength of only 57 men, although it did have a full complement of 12 light machine guns, along with three heavy machine guns and two light mortars.

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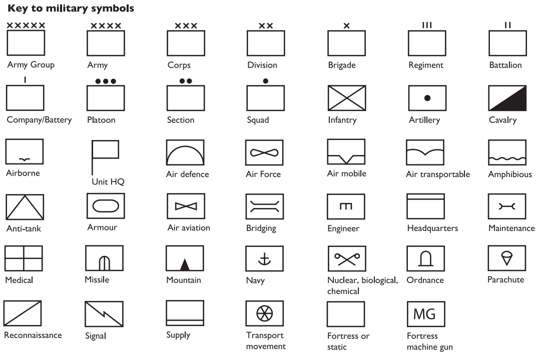
Key to military symbols
Army Group
Army
Corps
Division
Brigade
Regiment
Battalion
Company/Battery
Platoon
Section
Squad
Infantry
Artillery
Cavalry
Airborne
Unit HQ
Air defence
Air Force
Air mobile
Air transportable
Amphibious
Anti-tank
Armour
Air aviation
Bridging
Engineer
Headquarters
Maintenance
Medical
Missile
Mountain
Navy
Nuclear, biological, chemical
Ordnance
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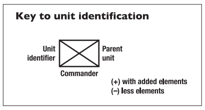
Transport movement
Fortress or static
MG
Fortress machine gun


Key to unit identification
Unit identifier
Parent unit
Commander
(+) with added elements
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Author's note

A note on transliteration: I have kept ' to represent a soft sign in Russian names and terms appearing in transliterated form.

Editor's note

In the German armed forces of World War II, companies (*Kompanien*) were given identifying Arabic numbers, while platoons (*Züge*) were given Roman numerals. Many units featured in this book were given the designation *Abteilung*, this term indicating a unit of company or battalion size. In this study, divisional, regimental and battalion-level units are given their full German-language designations, while abbreviated titles are used for subunits. For example, 4./LettPolBtl 18 refers to 4. Kompanie, Lettisches Polizei-Bataillon 18, while 3./OstReiterAbt 281 indicates 3. Kompanie, Ost-Reiter-Abteilung 281.

Glossary

Armenisches	Armenian
Bataillon	battalion
Einwohner	local
Estnisches	Estonian
Feld	field
Feldgendarmerie	military police
FlaK	anti-aircraft
Grenadier	infantry (after October 1942)
Gruppe	group
Halb	half
Infanterie	infantry
Kampf	battle
Kompanie	company
Landesschützen	Territorial infantry
LdSchtzBtl	*Landesschützen-Bataillon*
Lettisches	Latvian
LettPolBtl	*Lettisches Polizei-Bataillon*
Nordkaukasisches	North Caucasian
Ost	east
OstReiterAbt	*Ost-Reiter-Abteilung*
Panzerzug	armoured train
Pionier	pioneer
Polizei	police
Radfahr	cyclist
Reiter	mounted
ResPolBtl	*Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon*
Schutzmannschaft	auxiliary police
Sicherungs	security
verstärktes	reinforced
Zug	platoon